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Beyond Limits: Cultural Identity

in Contemporary Canadian Fiction

BY

Alain Régnier

**A Thesis/Practicum submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of The University of
Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirement of the degree**

MASTER OF ARTS

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Abstract

This thesis deals with the fictional works All That Matters by Wayson Choy, Monkey Beach by Eden Robinson and L'immense fatigue des pierres by Régine Robin, and the manner in which the authors of these texts have approached the issue of cultural identity from their particular vantage point in Canadian society. Drawing significantly on the thoughts of Homi K. Bhabha and Judith Butler, the study explores the problem of cultural liminality and hybridity, and how identities come to be formed under such conditions. Each of the works considered in the thesis demonstrates the ways in which intercultural exchange and the crossing of cultural boundaries allow for an overstepping—both intellectual and literary—of the normative constraints of established forms of selfhood.

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Chapter One

Introduction

This thesis examines the novels All That Matters by Wayson Choy and Monkey Beach by Eden Robinson, as well as the collection of interrelated short stories L'immense fatigue des pierres by Régine Robin, and the manner in which these texts represent the formation of cultural identity in different social and historical contexts. The need to understand and deal with cultural differences and their interaction continues to grow in urgency. Although cultures have never been pure or entirely self-contained, the mass migration of populations during the last century has made this reality tangible in a way it may not have been before. Trinh T. Minh-ha (who describes the 1980s as “the decade of refugees and the homeless masses”) notes that refugeeism has by the end of the twentieth century established itself as a common pattern virtually everywhere in the world (2). And it has become just as apparent that Western multicultural policies and approaches to immigration have in large part failed those they were meant to accommodate.¹ Indeed, Eleanor Ty argues that “a hierarchy of cultures” continues to lie concealed in Canadian legislation despite its efforts to promote fairness in its policy-making (7). Parallel to the immigration issue, the civil rights movements in North America and, more recently, the advent of postcolonial studies in academic settings have given voice to the disaffection of First Nations people. As Homi K. Bhabha writes, “The whole nature of the public sphere is changing so that we really do need the notion of a politics which is based on unequal, uneven, multiple and potentially antagonistic political identities” (Third 208). Former views of national unity may no longer be desirable, or even conceivable, and the necessity has become one of finding a way of thinking about culture that can reconcile such differences.

My own concern for the problem of cultural identity has come about through my experience as a Francophone residing in Western Canada, where the presence of the

French language is steadily diminishing (Castonguay 30-2). Out of this experience has grown an interest in hybridity and the idea of living between cultures, in addition to the process of cultural transmission and the role of language in the maintenance of cultural identity, and finally how writing can serve as a way to recover language and culture, even if it must paradoxically pass through the language of dominant culture to do so. It is with this in mind that I attempt to grasp in my study what it is exactly that takes place when different cultures come together and how it is that the formation of the cultural self occurs.

In his introductory chapter to Questions of Cultural Identity, Stuart Hall speaks of the “discursive explosion” (1) that has occurred in the debate on identity during the final decades of the twentieth century. One of the more generative ideas in the discussion—what Hall calls a “radically disturbing recognition”—has involved coming to accept the central role of the other in the production of meaning at both the individual and communal levels, that the self can only be defined positively by and through its interaction with its surroundings, with what it is not (4-5).² It is this notion of “suturing” between the self and the world in which it finds itself that lends political import to the deliberation over identity, not so much because of what it has to say about the intersubjective elements implicated in the construction of selfhood but because of what it reveals about identity’s relation to social institutions and structures of power (16). The rapport between self and other can therefore no longer be thought of in terms of a static binary; in fact, it is this active relation of differentiation, as will be shown, that allows for

any form of symbolic exchange to take place at all (Bhabha, Location 74). And it is from this shared space that a sense of both personal and collective values can be said to arise.

Bhabha uses the expression “beyond” to account for this present-day understanding of culture. Dialogue on the matter, he remarks, now commonly situates culture in “the realm of the beyond”—a state whose temporal and philosophical nature is hinted at in the recurrent use of the prefix post in contemporary discourse that indicates an attempt to move away from the former strictures associated with modern and Enlightenment thought (such as in the terms postmodernism, postcolonialism or postfeminism, for example). The beyond is a middle space, no longer affected by the teleological aspirations of “Beginnings” or “endings,” but which must be thought of, rather, as a

moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion. For there is a sense of disorientation, a disturbance of direction, in the ‘beyond’: an exploratory, restless movement caught so well in the French rendition of the words au-delà—here and there, on all sides, fort/da, hither and thither, back and forth. (1-2)

Back and forth, because, if the beyond signals the idea of a distance in thought, this feeling of removal can only be grasped at the moment of the subject’s return to its “present” condition (6). In this manner, Bhabha contends that genuine cultural exchange necessarily “takes you ‘beyond’ yourself in order to return, in a spirit of revision and reconstruction, to the political conditions of the present” (4). This repeated movement across the boundary of cultural contact produces the sense of difference central to notions of cultural identity. Such transgressions into the beyond, into alternate and sometimes

conflicting cultural time frames, serve to disrupt perceptions of continuity in the subject's historical present. This disjunctive experience, for Bhabha, is not to be celebrated in itself, but for the possibilities it allows in the realignment of social and cultural spaces (6). The interstice dissolves binaries.

For these reasons, the idea of identity can no longer be organized solely around individual concepts such as class or gender but must be taken in as resulting from a complexity of subject positions. The once unitary and self-sustaining self must be seen as coming into existence "in the articulation of cultural differences," in those multiple "in-between' spaces," where new moments of selfhood are continuously reinscribed and made possible (2). Indeed, traditional notions such as the depth and interiority of consciousness and the self, which, according to Bhabha, continue to privilege the signified over the signifier, are illusory. In the poststructuralist model of identity that he espouses, by contrast, "the priority (and play) of the signifier reveals the space of doubling (not depth) that is the very articulatory principle of discourse. It is through that space of enunciation that problems of meaning and being enter the discourses of poststructuralism, as the problematic of subjection and identification" (71). The question of identity is thus inextricably linked to language for Bhabha, and is embodied in the linguistic gap between enunciation and proposition. The gap, though unrepresented in any given statement, is related to this statement's occurrence in a specific time and place. The interpretation of any statement must therefore do more than simply acknowledge the "I and You" involved in the proposition but must also take into account this disjunction between enunciation and proposition by passing through what Bhabha calls "a Third Space, which represents both the general conditions of language and the specific implication of the utterance in a performative and institutional strategy of which it cannot

‘in itself’ be conscious.” It is this split which is present but unrepresented in a statement that brings a sense of ambiguity to all signifying acts. The split ensures the impossibility of any definite correspondence between content and context, between the substance of the utterance and the conditions of its enunciation. It is precisely this division between enunciation and proposition that is crucial to any act of cultural analysis that intends to move past continuous and unified notions of culture and cultural identity. For, as Bhabha writes, “The splitting of the subject of enunciation destroys the logics of synchronicity and evolution which traditionally authorize the subject of cultural knowledge” (53).

The Third Space becomes a sort of interpretive space that recognizes and can accommodate the equivocalness of the enunciative act. The implications that it holds for cultural analysis are manifold. The nature of the enunciative act, at its very basis, guarantees the impossibility of fixed meaning, as any utterance can be perpetually reread in altering historical and cultural contexts (55). “The intervention of the Third Space of enunciation, which makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process, destroys this mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is customarily revealed as an integrated, open, expanding code” (54), Bhabha claims. Once an understanding of the consequences of this “contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation” is arrived at, that is, that enunciation can never coincide with proposition, any assertion of cultural origins or purity is shown to be groundless, even without recourse to empirical evidence (55). For Bhabha, this Third Space prepares the way for the expression of cultural difference (an idea which he opposes to the less receptive notion of cultural diversity) (56). Elsewhere, Bhabha reflects on the similarities that exist between cultures that allow for their coming together, not because of what they may share in ‘content’ but because all cultures are symbolically constituted practices.

Meaning is produced “across the bar of difference and separation between the signifier and the signified” in a way that precludes any fullness in cultural identification, “not only because there are other cultures which contradict [any given culture’s] authority, but also because [this culture’s] own symbol-forming activity, its own interpellation in the process of representation, language, signification and meaning-making, always underscores the claim to any originary, holistic, organic identity.” This functioning of difference renders all cultures “decentred structures” and it is this sense of instability and movement that allows for the possibility of interaction between what often appear to be incomparable, even antagonistic, cultural positions or values (Third 209-11).

The framework of cultural diversity, according to Bhabha, fails to take into account the fluidity of culture’s symbolic production and tends to conceive of the practice and meaning of culture as “pre-given” and static. It conceives of culture in the relativistic terms of liberal multiculturalism, which ultimately has a totalizing effect on culture’s inherent variability (Location 50). Cultural difference, by contrast, acknowledges and works out of the enunciative act in a way that grants authority to culture over its production of sign systems and identity formation in a specific manner. It presents “the limit of culture” as a function of the enunciative split, as a site where the formulation of new meaning and political strategies continuously struggles against the traditionalist demand for unified cultural structures and “a stable system of reference” (50-1). For Bhabha, it is this Third Space that may eventually “open the way to conceptualizing an international culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture’s hybridity” (56). Cultural difference draws attention to “the signifying boundaries of cultures,” where meaning is at

once contested and generated (50). It is at these boundaries that cultural interaction is shown to be a thoroughly symbolic activity.

In Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body, Sidonie Smith charts the development of the Western self, of what she terms the universal subject. The idea of the 'individual'—"a universal human subject who is marked individually"—emerges during the Renaissance and acquires the weight and currency of an essentialized concept over the following centuries (5). The self in this form is clearly delimited and is restricted in its engagement with other selves, being perpetually called upon to assert its position as separate from the latter, who are likewise constituted. The subject thus self-contained posits society as external to it, reinforcing its sense of "internal integrity" (6). The universal subject is also thought of as "both prelinguistic and extralinguistic," a relation to language (itself perceived as "transparent and mimetic") that facilitates the self's claim to rationality (17). The rational self—"presum[ing] the possibility of self-knowledge"—comes to be situated outside nature, allowing it to transcend its material context and providing it with a means to objectivity by which to address the surrounding world. The claim to pure reason also lends the universal subject its sense of agency, its perception of mastery "over meaning, personal destiny, and desire." However, it is precisely through its affirmation of rational thought that the self comes to be essentialized. "[S]ince everyone shares this common source," Smith writes, "one individual can share, understand, and identify with another. All 'I's are ontologically identical, rational

beings—but all ‘I’s are also unique. This is the stuff of myth, imperious and contradictory” (8).

It is under these circumstances that consciousness and the mind are dissociated from the body over the course of the eighteenth century. The body is neutralized and contained; it is “drained of its chaotic and grotesque potential.” If knowledge of the world is acquired and approached through reason, emotion, or the irrational, is associated with the body and is deemed suspect, “subordinated to and by reason.” This “objectification” of the body, in the end, will have the effect of rendering “more fully body” those who are “identified as culturally ‘grotesque’” (6-7), which is to say women, the lower classes and the non-European races (17). The body, for Smith, comes to serve as a site of “joining/separating,” where one subject is distinguished from another. The body thus “functions as a sorting mechanism whereby the culturally dominant and the culturally marginalized are assigned their ‘proper’ places in the body politic.” In this way, those who are peripheral to the dominant culture, or who are identified as marginal, are set off and excluded from the internally-oriented universal subject (10).

In the latter half of the twentieth century, however, the philosophical and psychoanalytical endeavours of Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan have served to break down the “metaphysical conceptions of self-presence, authority, authenticity, [and] truth.” For both thinkers, Smith writes,

the ‘self’ is a fiction, an illusion constituted in discourse, a hypothetical place or space of storytelling. The true self, or core of metaphysical selfhood, can never be discovered, unmasked, revealed because there is nothing at the core. The self has no origin, no history, since both origin and history are, like the self, fictions. Moreover, since the self is split and

fragmented, it can no longer be conceptualized as unitary. At any given moment the self is different from itself at any other given moment. (56)

Hence, though the universal subject continues to hold a position of influence in the Western world, in terms of both everyday comprehension and self-discipline, alternative ways of conceiving the self have nonetheless been found (57).

Identity as an idea has in this manner come to be placed “under erasure,” according to Stuart Hall, indicating that it is “no longer serviceable” or “good to think with.” Yet, despite its limits, it remains an irreducible concept in questions of politics and agency, occupying an undeniable position within the Western way of thinking (1-2). One of the more important developments in the field has occurred in the work of Michel Foucault, where the subject comes to be “produced ‘as an effect’ through and within discourse” (10). From this perspective, the self is thought of as a function of language, a situation that works to disperse the self, rendering it unstable and any notion of essence untenable (3). If there is a shortcoming to Foucault’s assessment, however, it lies in his overestimation of disciplinary control and his underestimation of the subject’s agency and capacity for resistance (12). For Hall, the problems that have yet to be adequately addressed in the debate on identity centre on the further need to understand the self’s relation to institutional structures and the bringing together of the separate fields of psychoanalysis and discursive theory (14, 7). In this respect, Judith Butler has provided a certain impetus to the discussion in her attempt “to subject psychoanalysis to a Foucauldian redescription,” to use her words (in Hall 15).

What is of interest in Butler’s work in particular, Hall says, is the way in which she brings about the articulation of subject, body and identity in a theory of performance (14). According to Butler, gender norms (and those of identity in general, it could be

argued)³ are constituted not by some external or originary law, but by the repetition of gendered acts in themselves, which come to acquire meaning through a process of “sedimentation”—social laws are thus generated by and through their enactment, or performance (405, 407, 410). While the performance of gender, or other roles, may be a source of pleasure in some instances, very often these are maintained through forms of duress. The misperformance of social roles entails “clearly punitive consequences” in such a way as to render the performance of specific roles a “strategy of survival” (405). What results is the “illusion of an abiding gendered self” (402). The self that Butler puts forth in response to such reified subjective constructs is situated in language and therefore “irretrievably ‘outside’” (indeed revealing that the notion of interiority itself is “a publicly regulated and sanctioned form of essence fabrication”) (412). Despite its seeming durability, identity becomes inherently unstable in Butler’s approach. Located in time, the self is forever in a state of repetition, continuously reproducing itself. While acknowledging that the self is never prior to language, Butler’s theory nevertheless lends the subject a sense of agency in its power to misperform its social roles. The possibility for change lies precisely in the fact that identity “acts” are “internally discontinuous” and arbitrary in relation. It is this disjunctive characteristic of identity that allows for the contestation of its “reified status” (402). The creation of the self becomes in this way a constant negotiation between what is desired and what is historically permitted (405).

Each of the three literary works that I will study in this thesis can be seen as taking place in or engaging with the idea of the ‘split’ in various ways. Each of the texts

is set in the liminal space between cultures. Each deals with the notion of linguistic difference or the enunciative split, in demonstrating both the strange and invigorating effects that result in bringing disparate language systems together and the difficulties that arise in the impossible task of describing the cultural self through language. In a related manner, each of the works can be taken as a textual splitting of ways or (mis)performance of sorts, a redirection in the enactment of cultural identity in the attempt to renegotiate and reinscribe the self in its social (and literary) space.

The first chapter of the thesis looks at Wayson Choy's All That Matters, a novel that explores the manner in which forms of Chinese cultural authenticity are destabilized through their contact with Western society. Drawing on his own childhood experiences and historical research, Choy depicts a crucial period in Chinese-Canadian history in his rendering of Vancouver's Chinatown during the interwar and Second World War periods. He examines the coming together of Chinese and mainstream North American culture and the effects that this interaction has on the younger members of the Chinatown community. The novel, in particular, addresses the problem of creating change in the face of tradition's intransigence. The second chapter will consider Monkey Beach by Eden Robinson, a novel that represents Haisla life in the West Coast village of Kitamaat and the ways in which this community has sought to accommodate the conflicting cultural values and expectations of Haisla tradition and Western culture. While the text's portrayal of this cultural exchange serves to disrupt common notions of Aboriginal authenticity, it also reveals a need for new means of engaging with traditional culture. The Haisla community's recovery from the residential school experiment is of equal importance to the novel. Residual signs of colonial violence at once haunt the work and are central to it. The third chapter will provide a reading of Régine Robin's L'immense

fatigue des pierres, a collection of autobiographical short stories, or “biofictions,” as Robin has named them. Writing against the nostalgia of folkloric depictions of Jewishness (sujet 102), Robin endeavours to represent the Jewish experience in the twentieth century following the Holocaust. The collection reveals the memory of survivors to be an ambivalent matter—it cannot be easily recollected, yet cannot be forgotten. It is never fully present, and dealing with the trauma of the war is not readily accomplished.

Each of these texts contest in their own way the received ideas governing the self and the racial and ethnic subject in Western society, advancing more receptive methods for handling encounters with difference. Meaning is shown to be generated through interaction with others and the surrounding world. Some of the questions I attempt to take up in the following chapters involve the response of different cultural minority groups to Western dominant culture; ideas related to history, memory and cultural transmission; as well as the way language and literary form come to contribute to representations of cultural identity. Each of the three works studied adds to the understanding of how identities come to be formed under culturally hybrid conditions. The ultimate aim of the thesis is to illustrate how cross-cultural engagements affect and allow for the transgression of established normative bounds of subjectivity.

Chapter Two

At the Limits of Chinatown: Cultural Translation, Liminality
and Rewriting Tradition in Wayson Choy's All That Matters

In her article “Can One Say No to Chineseness?” Ien Ang speaks of what she calls the “Central Country complex,” an idea of a “cultural core” that is “so deeply entrenched in the Chinese historical imagination that it is difficult to disentangle our understanding of Chineseness from it” (229). Such ways of thinking about China and its diaspora in monolithic terms are readily at work in Wayson Choy’s All That Matters. At six years of age, Kiam-Kim’s Chineseness is already sensed as sliding by his family (“Never forget, you are Chinese” [53], his father cautions). At eight, his loss of Chineseness is virtually confirmed by his grasp of the English language and his lack of interest in learning Chinese, an attitude that renders him brainless by his grandmother’s standards (61), or equally disparaging, juk-sing—a “bamboo stump”—solid on the outside but hopelessly empty on the inside (71). Accordingly, Kiam’s loss of language becomes a source of anxiety for Poh-Poh. “Keep my grandson Chinese” (237), she urgently advises one of Kiam’s Chinese-school instructors, suggesting how ethnicity for her has come to be associated in an important way with language and the tracing of complex ideograms. Yet, as the novel will illustrate, attempts to provide the children of Kiam’s generation with a formal Chinese education frequently prove to be futile. Even as he spends the late afternoon absorbed in the activities of his grandmother’s kitchen, Kiam’s Chinese textbooks remain “dead” to him (78), and he must hide in the pantry to read the comic books furtively supplied to him by his father and stepmother. From Kiam’s point of view, by comparison, his elders’ concern about his ethnicity is mildly puzzling, for when he sees himself in the mirror he is made immediately, and inescapably, aware of his own Chineseness (70-1).

This chapter will address the way in which All That Matters challenges traditional conceptions of Chineseness, the “cultural core” that Ang refers to; first, through a reading

of the rather indefinite position of cultural liminality in which Kiam, the novel's protagonist, is located; then, by a look at the work's portrayal of gender and racial divisions and their recourse to conventions that can no longer be said to coincide with their social and historical context. The Chineseness that emerges in Choy's novel disrupts the fixed, essentialist subject positions of the past, while at the same time demonstrating how deeply-seated these constructs continue to be. All That Matters can thus be seen as taking part in a process of "de-mythologizing" (C. Lee 25) Chinese ethnicity. To this end, Choy's Chinatown is situated in the everyday and directly impacted upon by a range of historical events, from the stock market crash of 1929 to the economic boom brought on by the war in Europe. It is affected by an intergenerational divide between the early-immigrant generation and their children, whose lives have grown distant from the "Old China world" the elders continue to identify with (220). In this manner, Choy's representation of Vancouver's Chinatown will complicate perceptions of a unified Chinese diaspora with common ties to a "mythic homeland" (Chow 24). In keeping with Ang, All That Matters shows how "Being Chinese outside China cannot possibly mean the same thing as inside. It varies from place to place, molded by the local circumstances in different parts of the world where people of Chinese ancestry have settled and constructed new ways of living" (225). Chineseness under these circumstances is revealed to be multiform and ever-changing. The complexity is intensified, as Christopher Lee points out, when an ethnic group is "ghettoized" within a greater, and in this case Canadian, context. The sense of self that grows out of this kind of cultural contact is inevitably troubled and disjointed, and not fully centred in either community (25). This is precisely Kiam's plight when as an adolescent he deliberates over whether to enlist in the military:

As for going to fight in China, I had never seriously considered the idea, though the elders always said that one day every Chinese would go back to their home village. And many had gone back. But where would I go, with barely a memory of the old country? And where would my two brothers and sister go? Or Jeff and Jenny, who had also been born here? What world did any of us belong to? What world would we fight for?

(281)

On one level, All That Matters is about Kiam's gradual attempt to situate himself in a new and foreign North American space. The feeling of strangeness that he experiences upon his first sighting of the Lower Mainland is one that he will need to accommodate (1). This need to make sense of the place, and to be made sense of in return, can be thought of as a process of cultural translation. According to Homi K. Bhabha, cultural translation is an event or a negotiation that occurs with encounters at the edges of culture. What such meetings tend to bring to the fore are the incommensurabilities of each system, those "stubborn chunks" that refuse to dissolve into the cultural melting pot (Gomez-Peña in Bhabha, Location 313). This contact between cultures serves to redefine "those spaces that are continually, contingently, 'opening out,' remaking the boundaries, exposing the limits of any claim to a singular or autonomous sign of difference—be it class, gender or race" (Bhabha 313). Identities formed in such liminal spaces come to embody what Bhabha speaks of as "the element of resistance in the process of transformation" in a way that emphasizes the impossibility of ever arriving

at a full transcription between cultures (321). Eleanor Ty's use of the term "hieroglyph"—aptly inscrutable—to designate the physical and cultural characteristics that mark the Asian body in Western culture, such as skin colour or facial and bodily features, but also "particular accents, a way of moving, culinary habits, and other cultural practices" (3-4), may present a good way of approaching the obstacles that Kiam happens upon in trying to find a place for himself in his new home. As it is precisely these signs that indicate his cultural belonging in one context that virtually guarantee his exclusion in the other.

All That Matters will dramatize—sometimes to humorous effect—the necessity for a form of cultural translation in the interaction between the Chen and O'Connor households. Aspects of Kiam's daily existence that are in one instance dealt with in deeply intimate terms are childishly rejected in another by his friend Jack. The boy turns his nose up at Poh-Poh's cooking on more than one occasion and fails to catch the social import of the arrival of Kiam's "new mother" (32). Likewise, Kiam's gift to Jack of an envelope of lucky money proves to be a source of confusion for both Jack and his father, neither of whom can easily accept the giving away of money for what seems to be no apparent reason (58). Food and family ties in addition to certain customs and forms of etiquette thus prove to be unassimilable in the North American context. Equally, the need to move between cultures becomes a problem for Kiam and his siblings as well at times, even if they are relatively well-acquainted with both worlds. The distinction between the Chinese and Christian calendars, for instance, frustrates the attempt of Sek-Lung, the youngest of the Canadian-born Chens, to carry out a final act of mourning for Poh-Poh in the burning of the Kitchen God's image. Sekky has forgotten about this

variance in time, but he easily grasps the importance that the difference would have made to his grandmother once it is brought to mind (380).

The process and outcome of cultural translation is perhaps most plainly reflected in the novel's use of the English and Chinese idioms in themselves. The language that Choy remembers hearing in Vancouver's Chinatown when growing up is a composite made up mainly of Toishanese, but comprises close to a dozen other dialects (Interview 34-5). Choy speaks of the language's "music and tonal structure," and its "amazing subtleties." "These village dialects to me are the music and the drum beat of that past. I recall these rhythms vividly when I hear the voices speak, when I recall that community" (35), Choy explains. (Choy himself claims to speak "a 'Vancouverese,' which is a very elementary Toisanese,¹ mixed Cantonese vocabulary, mixed English grammar" [36].) In one respect, Choy's work deals rather straightforwardly with the tension that comes with writing what is effectively a Chinese-language novel in English. The text will gloss whatever Chinese slips into the discourse and will employ changes in English syntax and the frequent use of italics in the characters' speech, both direct and indirect, presumably to convey a sense of the Chinese syntax and shifts in tone that Choy remembers. Taking from Bhabha's reference to the thoughts of Rudolf Pannwitz, one could say that the aim of translation in this case is not so much to turn Chinese into English, but English into Chinese (326).

The problem manifests itself in a more specific way at the level of direct dialogue, however, where English must be used to relate Chinese speech. It becomes impossible at times to say exactly which language is being spoken, especially amongst the younger generation of characters. For example, a discussion ostensibly taking place in Chinese between Jung-Sum, Kiam and the family will carry over to a conversation with Jack

without any signal of a change in language, aside from Jack's own non-Chinese presence (118). It seems possible to rely on the narrator's cues to a certain extent. However, as the name-calling incident between Jenny and Jung demonstrates (175-7), this is not entirely adequate, as it is revealed after the fact that the scene which seems to take place in Chinese actually occurred in English or a mix of English (178). To complicate matters, Poh-Poh has also picked up a handful of English epithets that she manages to use "without a trace of an accent" (69). The reader can assume that the characters are either speaking Chinese or English, and depending on which characters are involved, this seems to work generally. But the name-calling scene serves to introduce an element of uncertainty into such acts of supposition. Such a blurring of sign systems underlines the difficulty that arises in attempting to represent one world in another's language. The novel comes to demonstrate, finally, that there is no set way to identify and 'read' cultural differences, no means to clearly distinguish between universes, or to properly pass from one to the next. For those not located in both realms, the best that can be hoped for is an impression.

In the end, All That Matters can also be seen as attesting to that historical period when those who considered themselves to be Chinese sojourners began to think of themselves as Chinese Canadians, and when a wider process of cultural translation arguably acquired a sense of collective momentum. Paul Yee speaks of the members of this generation as those who "actually lived through the dark ages of anti-Chinese racism" and whose activity in railway-building, the Depression and the Second World War eventually led them to think of themselves as Canadian (in Lorre 71). For similar reasons, Choy sees the years from 1936 to 1943 (the time-frame of his earlier novel, The Jade Peony) as "a transitional time for Chinese-Canadians" (E. Lee 40). The fact that

Kiam's lifespan in the second novel coincides with the Chinese Exclusion Act's dates of existence (1923 to 1947) would seem to align him in a specific way with this epoch as well. In this manner, Kiam's process of recollection in the novel addresses a temporal as well as a strictly cultural rift in its endeavour to translate the Chinese-Canadian experience of this former period—one that involves the West Coast geography and the influence of the English language as starting points, in addition to the 'hieroglyphs' of Vancouver's Chinatown—into present-day terms.

Kiam's less than perfect command of the Chinese language, however, indicates a limit to his capacities as an interpreter. His cultural access is deficient, and any reading he gives of the Chinatown he lives in will be hampered by his lack of fluency in the way of life he is representing.² Kiam's perspective in All That Matters—as hindered as it is—nevertheless provides insight into the subtle and sometimes surreptitious workings of cultural liminality. As a child, he is given a certain entry as an observer into the adult world, yet his comprehension of what he takes in is affected by his want of knowledge. These restrictions, to a certain degree, are pointed to by narratorial cues—"Much later, I learned . . . (5), "Poh-Poh must have longed for . . ." (24), "I hadn't noticed at the time . . ." (367)—clauses that signal the narrative's speculative and retrospective piecing together by Kiam. Perhaps Kiam's tense position as a cultural mediator of the new North American space is most clearly approached through his assessment of the "black line" in the novel's prologue. As he nears the coast by ship, Kiam notices a train "snaking" down through the mountains and he is called upon to define for himself an object that he has

only ever heard of. By his father's rationalist and Westernized standards, the "line" is simply a train, yet its whistle stirs Kiam's imagination and serves to recall images of the dragons previously encountered in Poh-Poh's storytelling. What is a train whistle in one regard is the "wailing" of a dragon in another. The black line's eventual "turn[ing] into freight cars headed towards the city's row of warehouses and jutting docks" reflects the transition, at least at a conscious level, that Kiam will make away from his grandmother's manner of thinking in the novel (2-3). Yet it is not possible to fully dismiss Poh-Poh and the weight of tradition that her character carries, and Kiam will maintain a certain sense of ambivalence towards the world he lives in throughout the text. For Kiam, the train's mutability ultimately proves intractable. "[A] solid, whistling, steam-blowing piece of reality" during daylight hours, the train becomes "a steel-plated, steam-hissing grey dragon" as he slips off to sleep at night (14).

In a similar vein, tears occur throughout the novel in ways that stress the bounds to Kiam's viewpoint. "The tears of others had always provoked my curiosity" (49), Kiam states at one moment. But as the novel will show, curiosity does not always entail empathy or understanding. There are moments, especially as he grows older, where Kiam seems to more accurately read the tears of Stepmother (353) or of Sekky (380), for example. Yet, more often, his interpretation of others' tears is either blatantly wrong—tears are caused by camphor (37) or by soot (39) rather than sorrow, Stepmother's pain and fear of dying is taken for impatience (187), stifled crying is taken for stifled laughter (116)—or impaired by the ambiguity of the situation—Poh-Poh's tears (soon followed by laughter) may or may not be caused by onions (71-2). Somehow, Kiam is never able to entirely grasp the meaning of the tears he meets with. He is not unintelligent or unsympathetic, but certain realms nevertheless remain closed to him. The world thus

becomes progressively more difficult to read for Kiam as he grows older. If the gaps in his point of view were more evident as a child, as he ages, awakens sexually, and begins to assume a more prominent position in Chinatown society, the limits to his perception become less easily discernable.

The talk-story episode announces the beginning of Kiam's crossover into adulthood and the disruption of his child's innocence. Poh-Poh acknowledges the transition when she allows Kiam to use her rasp while listening to the story with his younger siblings and by including him in the adult work being done by Mrs. Lim and herself. Kiam is also becoming familiar enough with Poh-Poh's stories as to be able to single out certain conventions. He identifies the "old trick" of creating suspense through "dawdling" (125) and he is able to predict the comb's magical properties in the tale (128). And towards the end, he recognizes a silence in the narrative, that "something wasn't being told" (136). He begins, similarly, to see through the other 'stories' told to him by adults outside the home as warnings to young children. While he accepts that a boy once drowned in a cask of Mr. Ming's best liquor at a prior point in the novel (45), at nine years of age, he begins to doubt the substance of what he is being told. "Gee Sook was a kindly man, but he had told me once too often about the dead boy killed at the corner of the road," Kiam reflects. "I counted on my fingers how many boys had died right over there. [. . .] Yet, whenever we went to the cemetery to pay our respects at the Chen Tong Memorial, I never saw any little boys buried there" (143).

At thirteen, however, Kiam is led by his father into the world of politics, when he decides to involve Kiam in a collection for the New China Relief Fund. Earlier, Kiam had noted the contrast between his own experience of Chinatown and the "smiling" images depicted in an inflammatory article on Chinatown health standards in a

Vancouver newspaper (144). He nevertheless allows himself to get caught up in a similar image-making process when his father implicates him in the New China charity work. The Free China poster that initially spurs both Kiam and his father to begin the collection (which will make of Kiam a “soldier for the cause” [198]) seems to work much in the same way as the wartime newsreels and “Hollywood dream sequences” (383) that the boy is exposed to elsewhere. Later, Kiam will appear wise enough to resist such rhetoric, at least in part (343). Yet, as he sets out to canvass the neighbourhood with his father, he is rather unaware of what he is being made to recite to strangers, his formal Cantonese speech being compared to the morning prayer reeled off each day at school (207). As he sits one evening mulling over his math homework, the possibility of his spiritual salvation, and the “world’s problems” in general (217-8), Kiam seems embroiled by the “swirl” (217) of current events much as Jung had earlier been taken in by the eddy of Poh-Poh and Mrs. Lims’ storytelling logic (129-30). Deciphering the rhetoric of war and the myths of popular culture—both Chinese and Canadian—becomes a difficult task for the adolescent.

In the end, Kiam’s restricted point of view will come to influence the comprehension of his own position in between the competing worldviews represented by his father and grandmother, and the North American culture he desires admission to. Kiam’s way of thinking in the novel is more closely associated with Father’s than with Poh-Poh’s. He is “more Gold Mountain than Old China” (349), as he puts it. Nevertheless, there is a point in the novel where Kiam’s analytical skills seem to surpass his father’s. During the family dinner with Jenny—a scene where Father continues to make the increasingly unrealistic proposal that young Chinese Canadians “go back to China to fight” (316)—Kiam directs his father’s attention to the difference between being

“needed” and “wanted” by the Canadian military (312). Kiam’s conception of North America has also evolved to the extent that he begins to resist his father’s more ethnocentric thinking: “each time he swore against the Japanese atrocities and the ‘dog-turd Japs,’ I shut my mind. There were all kinds of poisons in the world, all kinds of wars to be fought. It seemed like we were all caught up in village gossip and in village hatreds” (405). Despite these changes in judgement and insight and his continued commitment to the rationalist turn of mind, however, Kiam’s attitude towards his grandmother’s view of the world wavers. In his father’s company, he dismisses Poh-Poh’s talk of ghosts and curses as being “not logical” (358). But when Sekky questions him about a Catholic nun’s visit to their grandmother, Kiam allows that he may have seen what Poh-Poh thinks of as a “black crow” flit by (360). In like manner, during Poh-Poh’s final moments at the hospital, Kiam reports on the return of the ghostly white cat, even as he resists what this might mean to his grandmother (362-3). There is also the overall sense that in the act of telling her story in itself, Kiam brings back to life Poh-Poh’s set of traditional beliefs and the general example of her generosity and forgiveness.

Choy’s novel thus leaves the reader with the irrevocable impression that nothing much may have changed for Kiam by the narrative’s conclusion in terms of his fully appreciating where he stands in Chinatown. In the opening scene of the novel, Kiam is wrapped in the arms of both Father and Poh-Poh as they approach Vancouver. The word “together” is emphasized (1), signalling the feeling of familial comfort that this memory evokes, but also Kiam’s liminal position that the narrative will render. By the work’s closing scene, Father and Poh-Poh are no longer immediately present. Yet Kiam continues to associate the train with an ancient dragon as he rests his hand paternalistically on Jenny’s shoulder (a gesture that recalls the “grip” by which both

Father and Third Uncle relate to Kiam earlier in the novel [194, 197]). The first letters of the Roman alphabet used to designate the train's loading ramps remind the reader of Kiam's place at the outer edges of an Anglo-centred culture. While Kiam has acquired a certain sense of perspective on his particular place in North America, there is a concurrent feeling that this outlook remains limited in some way, that Kiam's conclusions and observations cannot be entirely trusted. Choy subverts the traditional novel of development by leaving his main character somewhat unaware of the ways in which he continues to be pulled at by the different worlds he lives in.

Tradition proves to be an equally complex and ambivalent issue in All That Matters. When held up against Kiam and Father's modern thinking, it comes across as a connection with the past and with cultural memory that is integral to the community. It is difficult to bear the possibility of a home without Poh-Poh and her cooking, medicine and storytelling. And most of the characters show a certain need for this kind of practice and custom. Even Kiam seems to understand this as he reflects on the situation after the Mistress Mean-Mouth story, which has left Jung and Jook-Liang lingering in a state of enchantment.

I wanted to tell Second Brother what was real. Trains were only trains, as Father had taught me. Combs were only combs, nothing more. [. . .] All at once Jung's knee pushed against my back, his heated hand clutched at my shoulder, and I saw again his hopeful eyes; I knew then that saying the obvious would be careless of me, that both Liang and he would suffer.

Something had been taken away from me. If I said anything now,
something in them, too, would perish. (138-9)

Poh-Poh's world and her way of thinking are thus perceived as benign, and perhaps even quaint, on one level. Yet a difficulty arises when the characters in the novel come to organize their lives in accordance with a traditional respect for the dead and their whims. The very likelihood of Kiam's immigration to Canada, for instance, is based on the toss of a fortune-teller's coins, which serves to confirm the approval of the sponsorship of Third Uncle's 'paper' family by his dead wife (6). Another mystic will warn Father against "replac[ing] First Wife" at the risk of bringing a curse down on his family (19). The memory of First Wife is important to Poh-Poh and Father, yet the impossibility of letting it go eventually destroys Father's relationship with his living wife. Likewise, Third Uncle is forbidden to marry again, even after over twenty years of mourning, because his wife's ghost resents his having laughed at their son's poor handwriting on the envelope of his ransom letter (8).

These are rather overt manifestations of the effects of traditional belief on daily living, but All That Matters will also probe the more inconspicuous workings of certain social conventions, such as gender and racial identity. Part of the power of traditional conceptions of gender and race comes from their status as reified and naturalized modes of being (Butler 402). Judith Butler relates how such ideas of the self accrue over time through a process of "sedimentation" (407), and she speaks of these subject positions that acquire value over time in this way in terms of an "act." "The act that one does, the act that one performs, is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene. Hence, gender is an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be

actualized and reproduced as reality once again” (409). It is with this general idea in mind that Kiam reflects on the “invisible and entangled ways” against which Stepmother, and characters such as Jenny and Meiying, struggle throughout the narrative. He catches a momentary glimpse of these treacherous “ancient powers” when Stepmother finally confronts Father about her inferior position within the family (410).

The mahjong ladies provide one of the better examples of the imperceptible functioning of identity formation in the novel. The text will portray the women as “a tight group” (245), whose penchant for gossip nevertheless has the capacity to turn on itself (as Mrs. Leong will turn on Poh-Poh [305]). Indeed, their conduct is often driven by a veiled aggression.³ The women have also internalized their culture’s androcentrism, a trait that appears noticeably in Poh-Poh and her attitude towards Stepmother and Liang in the household, especially at the time of the girl’s birth (48). The novel will ultimately depict the behaviour of the women as a response to “the confinements of a very paternalistic culture” (Choy, Interview 36).

If gender and race can be thought of as an “act” or as a performance that is repeated over time with no set objective other than its continued reiteration, then the potential for transformation lies, to use Butler’s terms, “in the possibility of a different sort of repeating” (402). Jenny, due perhaps to her intimate relation to Kiam, is one of the characters in All That Matters who most visibly resists the role that her community has set for her. Though she is taken in as a girl by the images of Shirley Temple (175), and though she participates in the everyday talk of the war and Chinese enlistment (318), she also misperforms her role as a “Chinatown girl” (279). She denies, firstly, her role as a spiteful gossip. “We’re not our mothers dragging out the news over a mahjong game” (402), she states in one instance, in fact, defending Meiying who is being slandered.

Early on, she is identified as a discipline problem by her mother as well (85), who represents her as having “attacked her father” (89). While the accusation is overblown, the act of throwing anything at her father—book or scribbler—is still an affront to the family hierarchy. In much the same way, the younger Jenny refuses to acknowledge Kiam’s First-Son status, as their initial detailed meeting at the mahjong party reinforces. She is openly aggressive—“sneer[ing]” (100), “boil[ing] with anger” (101), and generally trying to stare down her antagonist.

The insidious forces of her social environment will prove to be stronger than Jenny, however. Although both families have been planning their marriage since childhood, Jenny enters into her relationship with Kiam in a rather flippant manner. “You make my mother happy, Kiam,” she states during one of their first physical encounters. “I want to know what she sees in you” (278). It is an ironic quip, yet it nonetheless highlights how a young girl’s sexual gratification can somehow be bound up with her mother’s state of mind. Their relationship begins as a casual one, which seems appropriate to both Kiam and Jenny. They have no formal intentions. Kiam is conscious that neither loves the other in any serious way (278); hence, they see no harm in going along with their families’ “designs” (309). However, the somewhat relaxed engagement does not register accordingly with Poh-Poh and Mrs. Chong, for whom Kiam and Jenny’s relationship looks very much like what they have been conspiring to have carried out for years. Indeed, shortly after Jenny’s meal with the family (and the pair’s brief encounter with Jack on the front steps), Kiam, as if predetermined, suddenly grows preoccupied with the idea of becoming an “official couple” (337), even fantasizing at one point of starting a family (354). While Jenny deems this formal step towards officialdom “Too showy” (337), there seems to be little she can do to derail the course of events. Jenny, in

the end, is ensnared by her game-playing with Kiam, though to all appearances they seem to have chosen their union. It is telling that, much like Mrs. Chong, Poh-Poh's happiness at her death is also founded on the understanding that Kiam will someday produce "many tiger sons with Jenny" (369).

Similar social pressures will have an influence on the men in the novel.

According to Tseen-Ling Khoo, the "icons of masculinity" in Western discourse (Australian and Canadian, specifically, where very few representations of Asian men circulate) tend to stress the physical and the martial, perpetuating images of the soldier, pioneer and sportsman (123). *All That Matters* will make use of each of these types of masculinity to varying effect, and both Kiam and Jack will participate in them in their own ways—at times misperforming their roles and sometimes performing them all too well. Jack is effectively cast as the North American masculine ideal in the narrative, with his flare for adventure and his "cowboy swagger" (328). Kiam also likes cowboys, and he is poised at Jung's first arrival to explain to his new brother that there are "bad and good cowboys" (108). As the novel will illustrate, some cowboys are also frequently both at once. After his first physical exchange with Jenny, Kiam begins to question his place in the male-oriented domain embodied by Jack. He is perplexed by the experience and by the new world that has materialized between Jenny and himself, yet he is reluctant to speak to Jack about it. Jack "looked so sure of himself: he would have known what to do if he had been on that back porch. I didn't want him to know how confused I was and how much I wished for Jenny to lie beside me now." Kiam understands that his emotional response somehow contravenes what is expected of him as a young man, especially in the company of another, and he decides to remain silent rather than risk being ridiculed by either Jack or Jenny (252-3). He will again go against expectations

after witnessing Jack and Jenny together in the library. Even after Jenny's desire for Jack is confirmed, Kiam resists confronting either of them on the subject, as the matter would typically seem to call for. The tension only increases, however, and the situation immediately reverses itself when Jack broaches the issue instead. He has been sitting "astride" the porch rail, cowboy style, waiting to tell Kiam about his decision to enlist and "Go fight for the good guys" (384). Kiam plays along with the cowboy act by slugging Jack in the jaw.

Maybe Kiam has been attempting to deny or forget what he has seen take place between Jenny and Jack, or perhaps he has been trying to emulate the silence of his elders, which had come as a source of comfort to him as a child, protecting him from the humiliation and hardship of his family history. The tactic does not transfer so well to his relationship with Jack, however, and only seems to aggravate the state of affairs. Still, a different sort of silence immediately takes over when Liang's "suspicious" face appears at the window at the sound of Jack's fall on the porch, as well as before the inquisitive Mrs. Lim waving to them from across the street (386-7). The two young men choose to conceal their disagreement, perhaps instinctively sensing the need to hide the details of their quarrel and protect Jenny's more precariously situated reputation within the community.⁴ Sitting afterwards, "Like a couple of stunned fighters at rest," Jack goes on to reveal that he may not be as unreceptive to Kiam's family and their way of life as Kiam had thought. Jack shows that he has been swayed by Chinatown's approach to family when he recalls Stepmother's words regarding Jung's entry into the Chen family: "We take care of our own kind" (387). The text has, in effect, opened up the category of "our own kind" through its portrayal of adoption and the transgression of bloodlines in Kiam's relationships with Stepmother, Jung and Jack. In the end, the candid dialogue

between the two men confirms Jenny's affection for Kiam (at least from Jack's point of view) and reaffirms their friendship. Their ambivalent role as able-bodied men is immediately evoked once more, however, by Meiying's request to have them trim a rug for Mrs. Lim, a task that parallels in a way the heroic part they have just played for Jenny. The scene at once recalls and undermines their position as men in a patriarchal system. While Kiam holds the carpet in place, and as Meiying looks on, Jack wields the knife and "stab[s] the blade into one end of the oversized rug" (389), a motion that hints at Meiying's upcoming abortion. The floor covering is violently made to fit the domestic space, to lay "flat" and "Perfectly" (389).

All three characters—Jenny, Kiam and Jack—are restricted finally in how far they can go in resisting the roles they have acquired over the course of time. For, as Butler points out, the formation of identity in any context is always "necessarily constrained by available historical conventions" (404). It is possible that Kiam and Jenny marry because it is all they can think to do. Kiam likens their relationship in one instance to "two lost souls on a sinking boat [. . .] paddling towards the safety of some distant, familiar shore" (376). Perhaps there are really few other options in Vancouver's Chinatown during the 1940s. Nevertheless, one is left with the impression that Kiam and Jenny's marriage will not be exactly like *Stepmother and Father's*. Likewise, the structures that seemed to dictate that Jack, Jenny and Kiam would eventually part ways, "Each to his [or her] own kind" (237), have failed in their case. At the very least, they have each come to feel concern for someone they were not meant to care about.

* * *

Rob Appleford speaks in his article on Monkey Beach of the manner in which Aboriginal artists are often thought of by the public “as impersonal explicators of truths about their culture.” To a certain degree his argument can be applied to ‘ethnic’ art in general. To illustrate his point, Appleford draws on the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss, who classified artists according to two types—the engineer and the bricoleur. The ethnic artist is frequently perceived of in terms of the former, “proceed[ing] with conceptual foreknowledge of the project of cultural expression, and whose artistry lies in the deft deployment of specially designed tools, in this case the certain signs of culture.” The work of the cultural engineer commonly turns on notions of authenticity and complete cultural fluency. Lévi-Strauss’s position is untenable, however, as Appleford demonstrates (he calls on Jacques Derrida in the process), since it situates the artist as prior to the sign system in which he or she is working. For Appleford, as for Derrida, “all discourse is bricolage, bound by ‘the necessity of borrowing one’s concepts from the text of a heritage which is more or less coherent or ruined’” (85). What is central to Appleford’s argument is that no artist has, or can have, full knowledge of the cultural or social context he or she works within and, rather, is always limited by the medium and the cultural materials at hand. What emerges is “bricolage as artistic practice”—an approach that tends towards the idiosyncratic and the contingent (87).

The most prominent bricoleur in All That Matters is Poh-Poh. Faced with the divisive effects that her traditional storytelling is having within the family, she takes up the making of windchimes. It is an intergenerational project, involving Sekky, her grandchild, and combines an Old China toy-making practice with the found materials of Canada. The windchimes bring the family together in a way her stories no longer can. And after her death, the chimes permit her son a formal way of acknowledging her

passing that does not go against his new, modern way of thinking.⁵ In his deployment of fiction, history and autobiography, Choy can also be taken as a bricoleur of sorts. Ty claims, in her reading of The Jade Peony, that Choy's work offers "a record for posterity of the hardships and suffering of early Chinese immigrants," one that takes into account the social and political underpinnings of the characters' daily existence (118). While this may be the case, Choy maintains that, in his writing, story is privileged over factual accuracy. (In deciding between story or fact, he states, "storytelling comes first" [Interweaving 282].) Using fiction to tell history acknowledges the problem that perspective poses in any sort of historical writing and allows the writer to avoid being hemmed in by the factual strictures of the latter. As Father's attempt to "pin down truth" (298) demonstrates, moves to delimit or focus in too narrowly on an object are distorting and ineffective in their own way. Something similar can be said of race and ethnicity in All That Matters: though Choy's work intends to accurately depict life in a certain time and place, it does so by reworking the past's notions of Chineseness and cultural authenticity. The novel's twenty-first-century representation of 1930s and 1940s Chinatown in Vancouver is, in the end, meant to reinterpret the locale so as to alter our understanding of the space in the present day.

Chapter Three

Double Exposure: Cultural Fusion and

Cultural Recovery in Eden Robinson's Monkey Beach

In The Truth About Stories, Thomas King describes the preparations for his Medicine River Photographic Expedition, a project whose objective has been to record the images of Aboriginal artists across North America. In his account, King is puzzled to find that he himself is uncertain of how to identify and represent the people he has set out to photograph (53). In a time where a growing number of Aboriginal people are beginning to insist on being recognized as such, they must do so despite expectations of indigenous authenticity that are still very much in circulation (45). The difficulty becomes one of selecting which “signifiers” (44) to draw on. Identity, while still relying on the “touchstones” of “race, culture, language [and] blood,” can no longer depend on constructs of authentic Nativeness and has become more of “a personal matter,” King comes to understand, that is, “an idea that an individual has of themselves” (King; Momaday in King 55). This chapter will examine how Eden Robinson, in a similar vein, dispels the notion of cultural authenticity in Monkey Beach, how the novel does away with oppositions between Western and Haisla ways of thinking that support beliefs in cultural purity. The chapter will also address the manner in which Lisamarie, in particular, comes to understand her position in between these two worlds and the ways in which the colonial system has affected both herself and the people around her. Finally, I will suggest means by which Monkey Beach can nevertheless be seen as working to recover traditional Haisla values from within the greater context of dominant North American culture.

A point of entry into Robinson’s novel is Jodey Castricano’s discussion of the

“dissonance” (809) that occurs in trying to read Haisla culture through the European literary gothic form. In a sidebar to the article, Castricano relates her Internet search for information on oxasuli, one of the plants to which Ma-ma-oo introduces Lisamarie in Monkey Beach. Virtually nothing is uncovered in Castricano’s inquiry concerning oxasuli, but correspondence with a local West Coast ethnobotanist does produce results on the plant, albeit by the name of false hellebore. While initially much is to be found by Castricano on the plant’s poisonous properties as false hellebore, very little is said of its “magical properties.” Castricano’s contention is that “between false hellebore and oxasuli, lies a disjunction, perhaps between knowledge systems, perhaps between signifiers and signifieds. I ask about oxasuli yet hear about false hellebore.” For Castricano, Monkey Beach resists such epistemological substitutions and indeed emphasizes “that oxasuli is not false hellebore” (813n8).

Conceivably, the characters in Monkey Beach can be aligned in accordance with the false hellebore and oxasuli distinction—and the novel allows for this to a certain degree. Gladys and Albert, for example, are portrayed as Westernized characters who identify in an important way with the North American mainstream way of thinking. Mick and Ma-ma-oo, on the other hand, are more tangibly traditionalist. Even as a young girl, Gladys is said to have emulated the movie stars she read about in magazines (195), and she makes one of her first appearances in the novel (the family is going on a camping trip) thoroughly done up and wearing “carefully pressed jeans, a white shirt and jean jacket, and [. . .] a blue kerchief over her hair” (11). She likes her nails “perfectly manicured” (34) and is rarely seen outside the house without makeup (11). Accordingly, Gladys’s grooming habits carry over to her husband Albert’s preoccupation with gardening and landscaping. “Somewhere in our deepest past, in among the eons of

fishermen, there must have been a farmer” (34), Lisamarie declares with respect to her father’s horticultural achievements. Though they share a happy relationship in general, the couple’s occasional arguments tend to deteriorate into a sort of consumerist warfare, where a set of golf clubs is held hostage against chinaware (31), or a coffeepot is trashed in retaliation against a crushed cigarette lighter (246).

Early on in the novel, Lisamarie contemplates the relationship between her father and her uncle Mick. The latter is something of a drifter. Albert, by comparison, desires the stability of a steady job and resists his brother’s politicizing, being more concerned with life at home than with activism. While they do share a fishing net, Albert pays for it (he gets easily seasick [181]), and Mick works it (59-60). In a similar manner, Ma-ma-oo’s “tidy” but sparsely furnished house stands in stark contrast to Lisamarie’s home, and the grandmother’s habit of recycling her clothes into rags and then stuffing until they have “disintegrated” frustrates Gladys and her attempts to keep her mother-in-law fashionably up-to-date (74-5). Ma-ma-oo also differs from the younger generation in her understanding of childhood itself. She sees no need to reprimand or scold Lisamarie as her parents do and tends to take her granddaughter at her word, which (in addition to the machete that she regularly carries into the bush with her) earns her Lisamarie’s admiration and respect (214). Perhaps the best indication of Ma-ma-oo’s status as a traditionalist rather than a Westernized character occurs during her stay at the hospital after her heart attack:

When she stopped feeling dizzy, tired and nauseated, she assumed she was better. She’d casually rip off the monitoring wires and take off for a walk down the hallway. When the nurses ran in, ready to resuscitate her, they’d find her in the TV room, or chatting with other patients. She couldn’t

endure lying in bed. She insisted on feeding herself the day after her heart attack. She insisted on the nurses leaving the room when she peed. She told them what soap she liked and when she liked to bathe. She woke up at her regular hour of 5 a.m. and did her crossword puzzles until the nurses came in at 7 a.m. to give her pills, which she would only drink with orange juice. She never yelled or lost her temper, but was unmovable. When lectured, she watched the nurses with a disdainful expression, and then told them to bugger off. (236-7)

Through this friction and lack of cooperation with those in charge of her recovery, it becomes evident that Ma-ma-oo has not been taught how to properly consume Western medicine.

Castricano's comments on the differences between the two systems of knowledge, however, on the oxasuli way of knowing and the false hellebore way of knowing, are meant to signal a dissimilarity and do not represent the relationship between the two systems, how they influence and interrelate with one another, which is one of the novel's main goals. In fact, the text rejects any attempt at making such neat distinctions from the very beginning. Lisamarie's immediate family may have become somewhat Westernized but they continue to practice certain traditions such as cockle-hunting and the rendering of oolichan grease. Mick and Ma-ma-oo, for their part, have acquired a non-traditionalist penchant for Dynasty and Elvis Presley, as well as for Christmas trees and dry spareribs. Even Ma-ma-oo herself, it is revealed, once wore stylish dresses and danced the jitterbug (210). And if Mick has spent a significant part of his adulthood struggling for the restoration of traditional ways of life, he has had to do so in many respects by means of Western political strategies. Accordingly, Lisamarie's first sustained memory in the

narrative is precisely about leaving the dissonant cultural space of Kitamaat village for the wilderness of Monkey Beach at the start of cockle season. During this scene, Albert and Uncle Geordie fish off the boat, hankering after “something fresh” (13) to eat, and there is talk of the B’gwus legend. Yet the presence of Jimmy’s camera on the trip (as well as of “bug dope” (14), hot dogs and the gas-powered gillnetter) serves as a reminder that it is impossible to get away completely from the life of the village and that the idea of a pure ‘traditional’ space can no longer really be held.

For much of the novel’s first part the Western and traditionalist systems of knowledge seem to coexist peaceably—the characters take from both worlds as they wish. This impression is disrupted for the first time, however, at the settlement feast, where Lisamarie initially observes the tension between Ma-ma-oo and Trudy. Her response underlines her position as an outsider and latecomer to the relationship: “I couldn’t figure out why Ma-ma-oo and Aunt Trudy didn’t get along.” It is her cousin Tab, Trudy’s daughter, who finally reveals to Lisamarie the secret of the family’s troubled history, which involves domestic violence and time spent at residential school (59). The conflict between the two worldviews reaches its head at the end of the first part during the Kemano fishing trip, where the past and its memories of abuse resurface. Nightmares of his murdered wife Cookie disturb Mick during the first night, and the episode culminates in an explosive scene the next day in which Mick confronts Aunt Edith and Uncle Geordie about their Christian faith and its role in the residential school project (109-10).

* * *

Lisamarie, the novel will come to demonstrate, is situated between the Western and traditionalist spheres in a manner that differs somewhat from the other characters. In her analysis of Robinson's short story "Queen of the North," Nancy Van Styvendale draws on the theory of Judith Butler, which sees identity formation as coming about through the "distinct repetition and interpretation" of pre-existing cultural "directives." As Van Styvendale writes, "each individual reiteration of 'self' functions both to recall and mimic the way that identity has been produced within a certain historical situation and to reinterpret and reconstruct these historically-constituted possibilities" (95). Jimmy provides one of the clearest examples in Monkey Beach of the functioning of this sort of subjective mimicry. In a way, Jimmy resembles Mick: he is attracted by direct action and is a little reckless, and the novel will associate Jimmy with his uncle in different ways, such as through the use of wolf imagery ("loping" [22], howling [24, 347] and the wolfing of food [347]), for instance. However, there is a sense in which Jimmy is very much not from Mick's world. (Gladys will remark on how her son, in fact, takes after Albert [117].) Jimmy is a seamless imitator of Western "identity scripts," to use Van Styvendale's term. Lisamarie tells of the way he "copied everybody" at the local swimming pool:

If the kids hurled themselves off the diving board, he was next in line, making a ferocious run for it, bouncing off the end, curling up and cannonballing into the water. If some girls dived underwater for brightly coloured rings, Jimmy had to do it too. I would watch him go into the swimming lane and copy adults doing strokes, afraid that he was going to get hit, but he never did. (48)

Likewise, Jimmy becomes a mimic of television culture, becomes “absorbed” in its depictions of Olympic competition to the point that even his play away from the television invariably ends “with him getting a medal and placing it around his own neck” (166). “No guts [. . .]. No glory” (157), he recites, as he steals the keys to the family car as a young boy in an attempt to drive it like his father. Even in his subsequent relationship with Adelaine, Jimmy is unable to speak of his affection outside of the banal language of popular culture:

‘She makes me feel like . . . like,’ he stopped, frustrated.

‘Like a king?’

‘No. Yes. When I’m with her, I’m a better person. I’m not a fuckup with her. No, that’s not right. I’m strong. I’m fast. I can leap tall buildings in a single bound.’ (359)

The novel will work to set up an opposition between Jimmy’s character and his sister’s—“honour roll” student and “Olympic Hopeful” on one hand (166), relative outcast on the other. Lisamarie’s first scenes of childhood—scrambling through woods, kicking at her uncle’s shins in defense of her father—hint that she is not meant to follow the prescribed roles of Western femininity. Her initial resistance occurs most overtly at school when she refuses to read from a misleading history textbook, opting instead to sing one of Mick’s protest songs (69). Lisamarie, unlike her brother, is a poor mimic of Western identity scripts, and she tends to identify more intensely with her uncle, who in a manner very similar to Lisamarie is also set in between the Haisla and Western realms as represented by Ma-ma-oo and, in this case, Jimmy. When being babysat by Mick, Jimmy watches television, but Lisamarie questions her uncle about his past (52-4). When her brother has a swim meet, Lisamarie remains at the settlement feast or goes on the

Kemano fishing trip, always keeping within proximity to Mick. The latter fascinates the young Lisamarie, and some of her first moments away from the Westernized space of the village and her immediate family are with her uncle. At Kemano, she “cautiously copie[s]” Mick as he drinks from a stream (113). “I want to be like you” (96), she declares to her uncle earlier during the same outing, reinforcing her lack of interest in Western cultural practice.

Hence, the ground that Lisamarie comes to occupy in Robinson’s work is an ambiguous one. Her movement in both cultural areas proves to be hampered, as she enacts her identity scripts poorly on two fronts. She performs the Western one badly because it seems irrelevant to her, and, as I will presently illustrate, she performs the Haisla script inadequately because she does not have the means to do otherwise. In the end, Lisamarie’s position in the world will produce a rather singular point of view. By the beginning of the sixth grade, school has become a burden for Lisamarie. “Nothing they taught me meant anything,” she claims of her teachers. “None of the stories I read in English had anything to do with my life” (166). Of greater interest had been the time spent outdoors with Mick before his death. One of their first excursions into the woods is in search of q^oalh’m (salmonberry shoots). The scene serves to acquaint Lisamarie with her grandmother and leads to the novel’s first prolonged memory of Ma-ma-oo (74). Jeannette C. Armstrong argues that indigenous languages are directly connected to the territory in which they evolved. “[T]here is special knowledge in each different place,” she writes. “All my elders say that it is land that holds all knowledge of life and death and is a constant teacher. It is said in Okanagan that the land constantly speaks. It is constantly communicating” (175-6). According to Armstrong, all indigenous languages grow out of a “precise geography” and meaning accrues over an extended period of time

in a manner that directly affects the relationship that the people have with the land (178-9). “[W]henever I speak,” asserts Armstrong, “I step into vastness and move within it through a vocabulary of time and memory” (183). In this sense, Ma-ma-oo, speaker of the Haisla language, becomes a mediator of the land for Lisamarie, interpreting various circumstances for her granddaughter as they move through Haisla territory, ranging from the omen of a raven’s call (264) to the significance of fish bones in bear scat (150). In the process, Ma-ma-oo introduces Lisamarie not only to the vicinity’s landscape but to the Haisla language as well. The Haisla vocabulary acquires a certain presence in the second part of the novel (which is structured around memories of Ma-ma-oo) that is not there in the first.

Leslie Marmon Silko describes how, in oral cultures, details concerning a certain region and its history “are most frequently recalled as people are passing by a specific geographical feature or the exact location where a story took place” (10). It is in this way that Lisamarie recalls her early trip to the Kemano River and the family’s traditional hunting and fishing territory. The recollection of travelling by boat to the Kemano camp site reflects on singular features that are specific to the area, providing details, in particular, on oolichan migration patterns and the importance of oolichan grease historically in the local trade economy (92-3). As Gladys, Mick and Lisamarie later move up the Kitlope River towards Kitlope Lake, Gladys recounts the story of the Stone Man (a land formation), as well as her personal memories of killer whales chasing seals in the lake’s shallow waters and what may or may not have been Mick’s encounter with a sasquatch (112-5). Likewise, Lisamarie’s decision to travel by boat to Namu, rather than by car or plane, which would take her away from Haisla territory, leads her directly through traditional waterways. During these moments, she reveals what she has learned

from her grandmother. At Skinny Point, she observes the mixing of the tides, relates what can be fished and where to shelter if spending the night (269). Further down the channel, Lisamarie's description of the landscape and its naming once again underlines the relation of language to place. One of the landmarks she describes, Gee Quans, or "pushed-out-point," is associated with a Weegit creation story. Across the way, a site is named after a game (na-ka-too) played by the family who once resided there (276).

Lisamarie is thus shown to have taken in much about the Haisla language and its traditional space, and as she moves through the landscape memories of her grandmother and the area's history are evoked in a manner that resists the dissociation of the two.

Yet Lisamarie has not retained everything that Ma-ma-oo has taught her, and as she passes by Clio Bay, dubbed ironically after the muse of history, Lisamarie admits as much. "I forget which family used to live here," she states, "Ma-ma-oo told me on one of our fishing trips." Of equal importance, the relation of language to land is also complicated during this episode. Approaching an island "which divides the channel in half," appropriately named Ga-bas-wa or "the mountain in the middle," Lisamarie explains that the small land mass is also called Hawkesbury Island. As she goes over the route that she intends to follow to get to her destination ("I'll be travelling 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"), there is a sense that Lisamarie is passing through a sort of labyrinth of names (180), some of which have a direct, orienting effect, some of which have no immediate meaning whatsoever (because they are presumably references to distant English history).

In a similar vein, Lisamarie considers towards the end of the second part some of the images that come to her as she sleeps. "When I dreamed, I could see things in double

exposure—the real world, and beyond it, the same world, but whole, with no clear-cuts, no pollution, no boats, no cars, no planes.” The more distant landscape she envisions is teeming with animal life that has, in the present world, been overexploited, in some cases to the point of extinction (265-6). She speaks also of the longing she has to be on the water with her grandmother. “I wished summer would never end. I wished I could do this all year and never have to go back to school. I wished I could pick berries and go fishing with Ma-ma-oo and spend all my days wandering” (253). However, the repetition of the word “wish” here implies an understanding that these hopes have little chance of being fulfilled, that the world that Lisamarie sees in her dreams has passed and no longer has any connection with the present reality. Indeed, the hikes that Lisamarie takes with Ma-ma-oo are not at all treks into some pristine wilderness. Their first outing in search of *kolu’n* (sapling cottonwood) takes place, for example, around a nearby service station (214).¹ Everywhere that Lisamarie goes in the novel, much as the place names in the Douglas Channel indicate, others—both Haisla and Europeans—have been before her, superimposing the territory with their own specific markings in a somewhat bewildering way.

As she continues to travel down the channel, Lisamarie meditates on the incommensurability of the English and Haisla languages. “Haisla has many sounds that don’t exist in English, so it is not possible to spell the words using English conventions,” she remarks. What follows is a lesson on how to pronounce certain Haisla words. The Haisla language, Lisamarie concludes, “is as different from English as English is from Arabic or Irish” (193-4). Simon J. Ortiz speaks in like manner in his discussion of the use of English by Native writers. “Using the English language is a dilemma and pretty scary sometimes, because it means letting one’s mind go wilfully—although with soul

and heart in shaky hand, literally—into the Western cultural and intellectual context, a condition and circumstance that one usually avoids at all costs on most occasions” (xvi). Lisamarie, however, does not have the luxury of such a choice. And there is a sense in the novel that Ma-ma-oo’s mediation between the land and her granddaughter is ultimately insufficient. Having lost the language of “the old stories” (211), Lisamarie is pressed to mediate for herself in contemporary English the information that her grandmother passes on to her. The oxasuli scene is a case in point. Lisamarie initially describes the plant as having “broad, smooth leaves that branched off the stalk like a tulip’s leaves.” Ma-ma-oo’s instructions on how to use the plant follow:

‘Here, you break off this much and you burn it on your stove—’

‘Like incense?’

‘What’s incense?’

‘Like cedar and sweetgrass bundles.’

‘Oh. Yes, yes like that.’ (151)

Indeed, throughout Monkey Beach, Lisamarie is continuously led to reinterpret her experiences into a language that she is familiar with. Q^oalh’m has a texture “similar to kiwi skin” and tastes “like fresh snow peas” (73). Uh’s is like “whipped cream” (272), salmonberry stew is “as thick as cheesecake” (78). Seals on a beach look like “fat cigars” (93), a great blue heron’s character is described as Charles Bronson-like (118), and the reflection of mountains in a lake’s surface “jigg[es] like a blurry TV reception” (119). While such references may serve to situate the reader on one level, it also seems like this constant referral back to Western culture is somehow needed if Lisamarie is to fully make sense of the world she lives in.

Western knowledge is therefore unavoidable and even necessary to a certain extent, a circumstance that is recognized in Lisamarie's eventual decision to return to school. And the novel is equally filled with instances where Lisamarie draws on this knowledge to locate herself in her environment, noting how a difference in temperature between the air and the ground produces wind (155), how a similar difference between air and water creates vapour (206). Yet the text works to question and undercut the ethical values that are related to Western thought as well. Edward W. Said conceives of Western knowledge in terms of domination: to have knowledge of something in the Western paradigm "is to dominate it, to have authority over it" (Orientalism 32). This differs greatly from the worldview set forth by writers such as Armstrong or Silko, and from what King refers to as an "ethic" of interdependence "that balances respect with survival" (113-4). The logic of the Western way of thinking is perhaps best illustrated in Monkey Beach by the disjointed passages on the human heart. "If you could open up your chest, you would find your heart behind your breastbone" (163), begins the first section, where the conditional verb tense suggests that what is to follow is an imaginative exercise. The reasoning carries over to the next passage. "Pull your heart out of your chest. Cut away the tubes that sprout from the top. Place your heart on a table. Take a knife and divide it in half, lengthwise" (191). It becomes evident in these sections, however, that what is being described is more than the hypothetical dissection of a dead organ. What is difficult to understand is how certain of these details could possibly have been acquired from a living organism. Consider, for instance, the statement: "The sound [of the pulse] you are hearing is not the heart muscle itself, but the four valves in your heart closing" (192). Or, "In the embryo, the heart starts beating even before it is supplied by nerves" (164). Situating the organ in the reader's own chest cavity

underlines the invasiveness of the scientific techniques that have produced such knowledge. It is a feeling that corresponds to the invasion of the commercial vessels pulling into the Alcan docks that remain “oblivious” to the presence of Lisamarie in the scene immediately preceding the first heart passage (163).

However, there is also something seductive about such forms of knowledge. After Ma-ma-oo’s heart attack, Lisamarie speaks of having become “gruesomely curious” as, together, they read whatever material can be found on the human heart, whether it be doctor’s pamphlets or children’s books. “[W]hen your body is falling apart, and you can’t do anything to stop it,” Lisamarie remarks, “there is a grim satisfaction that comes with knowing exactly what is going wrong” (236). In a way, Haisla and Western knowledge become fused in the novel, as another informative passage on the clams and cockles of Monkey Beach demonstrates:

Cockles are a favourite food of B’gwus, the wild man of the woods. He uses sticks to dig cockles out of the sand. Clams are his second favourite food. Monkey Beach is popular with B’gwus because it has so many cockles and clams. In clams, the sexes are usually separate, but cockles are hermaphrodites. Clams and cockles spawn at different times of the year. At this moment, the cockles are spawning. The eggs and sperm are squirted into the water, making it cloudy. Baby clams and cockles are called larvae. They swim around until they get big enough to drop to the bottom and grow shells. Muscles attached to the shells open and close the clams and cockles to let in food or to let out the foot to burrow. Clams have black tongues because a long time ago the world was on fire and the clams tried to put it out by spitting. (317)

The details concerning B'gwus and the black tongues of clams seem easily identifiable as Haisla knowledge. Words like "hermaphrodite" or "larvae" seem more clearly to belong to the Western episteme. Yet the sources of other observations with respect to spawning or feeding behaviour, for example, remain indeterminate. The two realities—as irreconcilable as they may seem—have produced a world all to its own.

Lisamarie is therefore singled out as a protagonist in Monkey Beach because of her cultural liminality and her retention of Haisla knowledge, as limited as it may be. And the text will explore the interaction between the Haisla and Western colonial worldviews by following the progress of Lisamarie as she becomes aware of the complexities of this difficult relationship and of her own position within it. Homi K. Bhabha writes that remembrance in the colonial context "is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful re-membering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present" (90). Somehow, because of the Hill family's fortunate place in the village, Lisamarie is repeatedly distracted from the disturbing vestiges of colonial contact that, in large part, keep to the edge of the text, though these are in fact signalled from the outset by Jimmy's disappearance, Lisamarie's own strange dreamlife and Mick's troubled past. Indeed, the novel will delay until the very end Lisamarie's recognition of the sad reality underlying her culture, that is to say how the sexual abuse experienced by Haisla children at residential schools decades earlier continues to undermine her community's integrity. To some extent, this sense of avoidance may simply be due to the group's unwillingness to talk of these past events. It

may also have to do with Lisamarie's character and her resistance to accepting what she is confronted by. The novel on certain occasions will place characters in predicaments where they feel the need to deny their awareness of the circumstances in which they find themselves. Lisamarie, despite her strong sense of curiosity and longing to comprehend, is no exception. Her way of dealing with Frank's affection and his Valentine's Day card, for example, is "to ignore it completely" (232). "Nothing's wrong. Nothing's wrong" (134), she repeats in response to the little man's warning of Mick's death. "The whole idea was ludicrous," she concludes when Tab informs her once more of the family's past. "I couldn't picture Ma-ma-oo letting anyone kick her around and I certainly couldn't see her hurting anyone" (254).

However, part of Lisamarie's failure to grasp the full scope of her situation has also to do with the fact that there is no one to guide her towards such an understanding. Silko speaks of how social cohesion is maintained in oral cultures:

Traditionally everyone, from the youngest child to the oldest person, was expected to listen and be able to recall or tell a portion of, if only a small detail from, a narrative account or story. Thus, the remembering and the retelling were a communal process. Even if a key figure, an elder who knew much more than others, were to die unexpectedly, the system would remain intact. Through the efforts of a great many people, the community was able to piece together valuable accounts and crucial information that might otherwise have died with an individual. (9)

It is precisely this social system that seems to have broken down to a certain degree in Monkey Beach. Jennifer Andrews notes how both Mick and Ma-ma-oo assist Lisamarie in "find[ing] a way to mediate between the frightening dimensions of this other [spiritual]

world and her own purpose in life" (14). Indeed, Mick and Ma-ma-oo are not only sources of knowledge on the ghosts and spirits in Lisamarie's life, they are also sources of comfort when she begins to encounter difficulties at school and in the social world. They teach her how to negotiate the space outside the village, but they also fill her in on aspects of her own family that she would probably not learn of otherwise, such as the childhood habits of her mother and father (195) or the story of their courtship (97). The untimely death of Mick and the subsequent death of Ma-ma-oo disrupt this feeling of closeness and well-being. On the night of Ma-ma-oo's impending death, Lisamarie leaves Pooch's farewell party filled with a debilitating sorrow. "The party rocked on without me, and I was filled with sadness that no one even noticed I was gone," she states. "I am alone," she goes on, denying the presence of the non-human life around her, "and I don't see anything but the auroras, low on the horizon, undulating to their own music" (291). With the deaths of Mick and Ma-ma-oo, Lisamarie seems to have lost her sense of connection to the place. She has also lost her two most important sources of knowledge on her community's past.

As Lisamarie moves through her world, her narrative is perpetually kept off balance—moments of near revelation are constantly countered by moments of humour. According to Richard Lane, the humour in Robinson's fiction "is indicative of a mode and strategy of self-survival, alongside the recognition that even in the darkest moment the creative mind can still interject and intercede via a subversive counter-discourse" (161). Lane also speaks of humour's "potential healing power" (167). The exchange between Mick and his brother-in-law Barry (72), though it will eventually be undercut by Cookie's own story, is one example of such restorative humour. An incident such as the painting of Pooch's toenails while he sleeps is another (243). Just as often, however,

Robinson's humour has the tendency to turn on itself. The ouija board scene works exactly in this way. What begins as just another adolescent prank becomes morbid and frightening as the board begins to refer to secret details of the characters' lives that are not meant to be spoken of (270). This tension between the playful and the serious is perhaps best embodied by the All-Native basketball tournament and its carnivalesque atmosphere, an event that Lisamarie compares to Mardi Gras (286). The tournament is cast as a type of social release valve and works at once to highlight and diffuse the disquieting presence of Josh, a direct victim of the residential school project now turned aggressor, as he appears at one point only to keep to the periphery of the action at the entrance to the gymnasium. As the fans leap from "their seats, cheering or booing, screaming at the refs over each call, and shouting encouragement to their boys," Lisamarie is perhaps the only one in the venue with her eyes set on Josh, who is trying to force an envelope of money onto Pooch. (Jimmy is looking in the general direction but his attention is focused on Adelaine.) Gradually, through her continued observations, Lisamarie is immersed into the novel's underworld.

Still, she has yet to learn exactly 'what happened,' what the meaning of Josh's relation to her community is, though its effects—broken families and substance abuse—are to be found everywhere in Lisamarie's environment. Her own home, for its part, has somehow escaped the influence of these disruptive social forces. Thieves and "druggies" (75), as Gladys sees it, are creatures that exist outside the Hill residence. And Lisamarie's parents are at times woefully oblivious to the conditions of their daughter's private life. However, this matter is also changing as Jimmy's interest in Adelaine, Josh's niece, draws her into the Hill family and threatens its insularity. Lisamarie, in one instance, prepares a meal to celebrate her success at school. Jimmy and her parents are in

high spirits, but Adelaine is not feeling well (334). The danger associated with Adelaine lurks at the fringe of the cheerful domestic scene. At the time of Jimmy's departure to "make things right" (39), Lisamarie continues to ignore the significance of the events that are taking place around her. It is only when she uncovers the unequivocal evidence of colonial intrusion into her community (Adelaine's birth announcement and doctored photo of a young Josh with Father Archibald) that she is forced to acknowledge what has steadily been seeping into her consciousness.

The ongoing relationship between the Haisla and Western spheres is further captured by the novel's imagery. Different critics have commented on the opening passage of *Monkey Beach*. Rob Appleford describes the first scene as "troubling" because in Lisamarie's acknowledgement that *La-es* "means something else" (that is, something other than what she is able to call to mind) "cultural loss is remembered and confessed" (92). Lane claims that the opening provides "a flavour of what is to come" (164). And Coral Ann Howells has also noted how an ostensibly realist text begins with a half-waking dream or vision (187). However, what seems significant in this opening scene is once more not simply the contrast between narrative conventions but their actual interaction. It is as if the crows—Haisla figures in their identification by Ma-ma-oo as bringers of good luck (125) and in their curious allegiance to the Hill family—understand that Lisamarie's experience of the world is necessarily mediated by the English language. In this way, their instructions to "Go down to the bottom of the ocean" can be taken as a reference to Western discourse, which associates images of water with the unconscious.

The novel borrows from Western psychology near the beginning to explain some of Lisamarie's recent experiences in a manner that would seem to support such a reading. The dead, for example, are described as "passive aggressive." At the same moment, Lisamarie struggles to shed light on an earlier dream of her brother. "Maybe dreaming about Jimmy standing on Monkey Beach is simply regret at missed opportunities. Maybe it means I'm feeling guilty about withholding secrets. It could be a death sending, but those usually happen when you are awake" (17). Lisamarie herself seems uncertain about which system to draw from. Later, she will describe her view of the ocean in words that resonate with a Western meaning: "As I stand by the window, the channel is dull grey-blue under the clouds. The Greeks ironically called the Black Sea Euxinos: friendly to strangers. Those who know the ocean know it doesn't make friends. Exitio est avidum mare nautis—the greedy sea is there to be a doom for sailors." (46).

The novel, in fact, is structured in a manner reminiscent of the unconscious. The narrative is non-linear and decentred in its movement between present and past memory; it is densely textured and driven as much by association as it is by action. It is ultimately Robinson's use of this loosened structure that may allow Lisamarie to recover parts of her cultural memory. Just as the crows address Lisamarie in Western terms, the Western construct of the unconscious—a space of 'free play' within Western dominant discourse, where accident and the idiosyncratic are given free rein, and the forces of reason and teleological thinking are dispelled—may provide Robinson with the means through which to reinstate elements of the Haisla way of thinking. Indeed, it is the novel as Western form, in the end, that is made to follow the thoughts of Lisamarie in Monkey Beach as she passes through traditional Haisla territory.²

Robinson's novel, through this merging of symbolic systems, thus creates a space for a deliberation on the process of recovering from the effects of cultural assimilation. For while the text demonstrates that the coming together of two disparate worldviews is no longer avoidable, it also shows that their union is asymmetrical. The Aboriginal influence in the new reality, where it occurs (tobacco, basketball, legend and spiritual practice), has been commodified and effectively neutralized. It is a world where B'gwus and Weegit, in their rising popularity, have become acculturated, "respectable," and their histories "sanitized" (296). They are depicted in the novel as active in the Western world, with B'gwus having acquired his own website (316) and Weegit having moved into a downtown Vancouver condo (296). The alternative, it would seem, is to follow the path of T'sonoqua the ogress, who in clinging to the shadows has become, "by and large, a dim memory" (337).³ Monkey Beach attempts to reinvigorate these figures and the natural world in which they move. It endeavours to redefine a term like magic and what it means to use such a word. As a physical space in the novel, Monkey Beach represents a site where such beings—figures of mystery as well as of "real terror" (Appleford 88)—can still exist. "Some places are full of power," Lisamarie observes upon arriving at the beach, "you can feel it, like a warmth, a tingle" (316). N. Scott Momaday remarks on how words themselves in oral cultures can often be thought of as magical, as carrying a certain kind of generative power (in King 100). This being the case, it becomes possible to think of Lisamarie's relationship to her uncle and grandmother in similar terms. Both characters affect Lisamarie in a profound way through their presence and stories, evoking strong emotions and opening new prospects onto the world. It is in this manner, by means of her contact with these strange, "magical" (316) forces (both human and non-human), that Lisamarie comes to understand her place in what is a wide, complex and

fluid universe. And it is precisely this sense of the magical that must be guarded against the assimilative forces of dominant culture.

Appleford comments that Lisamarie's description of the b'gwus as a "magical thing" in her second encounter with it can be read as "articulat[ing] a particular kind of self-reflexive irony, since as an 'authentic' Haisla woman with spiritual power, she is neo-colonialism's 'magical thing'" (98). However, it is this sort of reading founded on notions of authenticity that Monkey Beach disrupts. Indeed, Appleford writes elsewhere that "Lisamarie's struggle to learn her traditional language [. . .] reinforces the idea that the novel is not meant to be read as a product of cultural fluency" (100n5). Moreover, depictions of Haisla traditions in the text are continuously undercut by what Appleford calls "strategic ambiguity" (95). Such uncertainty forces the reader to withhold value judgements and conclusions that are based on fixed notions of Nativeness. In this vein, Appleford qualifies the novel's ending as "anti-positivist" because of the many questions it refuses to answer, and speaks of the need to allow for an "interpretive spectrum" in reading the text (95). In a manner similar to that which Helen Hoy touches on (179), the treatment of tradition in Monkey Beach presses on the reader the importance of resisting the reflexive absorption of apparent difference as cultural difference, of not taking a textual element that cannot be immediately interpreted as a defining aspect of another cultural group's identity. The pale worm creature in the novel defies uninvolved readings just in this way. How is the reader meant to approach the 'thing' and its whisperings? Unnamed, the thing does not seem to register on either of Lisamarie's linguistic systems. Maybe the language to describe it has disappeared. Maybe it is unidentifiable because it is pure invention—a thing, whose beckoning "may or may not be my [Lisamarie's or Robinson's?] imagination" (316). Monkey Beach calls upon the reader to take up a less

assimilative reading strategy, one that can be applied not only to the reading of the literary text, but to the reading of the racialized subject as well.

Chapter Four

The Work of Writing: Trauma, Memory and Mourning

in Régine Robin's L'immense fatigue des pierres

“I want the real Thing” (160), declares Patricia, one of the Internet chat-room characters that Nancy Nibor comes across in Régine Robin’s L’immense fatigue des pierres. Patricia is a biographer and the “Thing” that she is referring to is, on one hand, the ‘real-life’ story that she claims to write, as opposed to the fictional story. Yet this statement is immediately called into question, for while she professes an interest in the ordinary individual, the one cast aside by history, her work turns on the recasting of her clients’ lives into explicitly heroic roles, often involving changes in time period, culture, language and sex (111). Patricia can thus be seen as catering to the general, self-making fantasy of the American dream, a situation that is reflected in another chat-room partner’s desire to have his own life-story told by her in terms resembling that of George Washington’s (162). The allusion to this iconic figure of American legend corresponds in some ways with another fantastic conception, what Sidonie Smith has called the “hard nut” of the autonomous subject (2), and in this manner the Thing that Patricia is speaking of can also be read as the traditional, Western notion of the self-sustaining universal subject.

Until quite recently, the narrative ‘vehicle’ of the universal self (one which has also been constitutive of this model of selfhood) has been the autobiography, a genre that, according to Smith, has become “one of the West’s master discourses” (18). Though writers have long wrestled with the problem of the self’s representation and its relation to autobiography (Molkou 152-3), it is only in the last quarter of the twentieth century that writing has sought in a more consistent way to destabilize the autobiographical genre directly, to frustrate its expectations as well as to challenge the concept of the author as the text’s originating source of meaning through what has come to be known as autofiction (150-1). Developments in critical and literary theory, as well as in the area of

psychoanalysis, have questioned the self's secure and unified position within the autobiographical genre. And the autobiographical 'I' has since come to be conceived of as split, no longer identifiable with the writing subject, and ultimately rendered a textual element of its own (151). While a certain few have attempted to define autofiction as a distinct generic category, Élisabeth Molkou sees such efforts as somewhat counterproductive, preferring to think of autofiction as a subgenre of autobiography. Taking into account the latter's discredited reputation of late within academic discourse, Molkou represents autofiction as the "plus mauvais des mauvais genres" (an expression she borrows from Jacques Lecarme). It is precisely because of its marginal position that autofiction eludes definition, Molkou argues, allowing it to maintain what she considers a tense middle ground between the major genres of the autobiography and the novel (158-9).

Though the work will resist the conventions of autofiction as well in certain ways, L'immense fatigue des pierres can be at least partly situated in this generic category in that the text resists the solidity of the universal subject generally put forth by the traditional autobiography. The short story (or "biofiction") collection will contest received, rationalist notions of individual consciousness that situate the mind as "the center and origin of meaning" (Smith 7) in its acknowledgment of the body's material existence. (The narrator is forever eating, drinking and smoking; the aging Nibor is nagged by asthma, swollen feet [12] and other unidentifiable aching [29].) Yet the narrator's identity also defies the containment of the self by a clearly delimited body governed by essentialized notions of sex and gender. The narrator is doubly sexed and occurs at various states and stages of life: mother, daughter, brother, son; young, old, middle-aged, even into death. In this manner, L'immense fatigue des pierres unsettles the

sediment of normative subjecthood, to use Judith Butler's terminology, and the body becomes a field of discursive play in the text that challenges conceptions of the body as a site of prohibition. It becomes evident that Robin's world can no longer harbour the self as a stable, unified core, and the self's position in this domain becomes a function of chance (almost at times to the point of absurdity) as much as intention. L'immense fatigue des pierres can thus be read as an attempt to reinvent the self, for both Robin and Nibor, or perhaps more accurately, for Robin through Nibor. This invention of the self in the collection is depicted as an act of memory, language and writing, one that is necessarily retrospective and historically situated, as well as forward-looking. This chapter will explore how Robin approaches the problem of reinscribing the self from the perspective of the Jewish survivor of the Second World War. It will examine how the destructive effects of the Holocaust continue to be felt today and how L'immense fatigue des pierres attempts to overcome these difficulties by creating a textual space for remembrance and mourning.

Robin remarks on having come to the realization that for her "tout sortait de la guerre, que la guerre fut inscrite ou non comme thème dans mon oeuvre. En fait, sauf exception, je n'écris pas sur la guerre, mais avec la guerre." For Robin, the experience of the Second World War is forever present (Cybermigrances 52). The inability to escape the war, to somehow leave it behind, is a problem that the characters in L'immense fatigue des pierres each have in common. Faced with the need to cope with or respond to the events of the war, they remain perpetually withdrawn, emotionally cut off from the

others around them, unable to surmount their sense of trauma and loss. On more than one occasion, the characters refer to themselves as failures—of History as well as of daily existence (45, 117, 146). Michel's life in both "Le dibbouk inconnu" and "Mère perdue sur le World Wide Web" is at times scarcely livable (67). He is deadened to his surroundings, functioning on the fringe of suicide (71). Divorced, with only moderate contact with his children, he sees himself as unsuccessful (101). When he does seem to find happiness in Montreal with Flora, it appears temporary and fleeting, and is brought to a sudden end by the story's final events. Likewise, the journal entries in "Journal de déglingue entre le Select et Compuserve" will take up the failed relationship between the mother and daughter introduced in the collection's first story. In each of these three works, human relationships are mediated electronically by means of the Internet or fax and answering machines in a way that reflects the damaged social ties and the isolation that continue to thwart the possibility of satisfying human contact for the characters.

The situation is perhaps most clearly dealt with in the title story "L'immense fatigue des pierres," where Nibor has lost both her father and sister to the death camps and remembers having worn the yellow star herself for five years. Even fifty years after the fact, she continues to be haunted by nightmares (17-9). In a way, the lives of both Nibor and her daughter Yaël seem successful. Robin comments elsewhere on how, for the Jews after the war, "avoir la vie de tout le monde—aller à l'école, partir en vacances, faire des études, flirter, se marier, avoir des enfants, avoir un métier, aller au cinéma—a été une conquête. L'accession au droit à la banalité fut un grand bonheur" (Vous 121). Yet, despite their material accomplishments, something plainly remains lacking for both women. If Mémé, Nibor's mother, has lost her sense of inhibition as a result of the shock of the war (36), Nibor herself seems deprived of the capacity to invest emotionally in the

people around her, which may, at least in some respect, explain her love of houses and furnishings. There is a sense that Yaël understands this side of her mother. The long, detailed description of La Mandate that occurs in one of her letters to Nibor would seem to signal a desire on the daughter's part to interest her mother or attract her attention, even if this means she must remain second in importance to the house she lives in.

However, though she wishes to reconcile with her mother as she approaches middle-age, Yaël knows from experience that she must limit her expectations of Nibor. One of the more troubling moments in the story is Yaël's recollection of living as a girl with her mother. Her strongest memories of happiness result, oddly, from having been sick enough to catch her mother's notice. She also reflects on the sadness of being left behind by her mother on a night when the latter is preparing to attend the opera, and of the rage that is evoked in Nibor when Yaël voices her disappointment at being overlooked (26-7). The war has not left off for Nibor in certain ways, and Yaël is made another of its casualties. Although Nibor complains of her loneliness and of the general vacuity of her existence (39-43), she seems unable, or unwilling, to do anything to correct the situation. Her final thoughts in the story are of her daughter's gaze:

Tu auras le regard sombre des fleurs de la passion, les yeux quémandant la reconnaissance et l'amour, ces yeux que tu pris toute petite et que tu as gardés, bleu myosotis, bleu-vert, gris perle, mordorés avec un trait violet qu'on ne voit que sous certains éclairages, ces yeux de mal-aimée, beaux à y perdre son âme. Je ne sais pas pourquoi je n'ai jamais réussi à lire dans ces yeux-là, lilas, pervenche, toi ma douce, à qui je dis des mots d'amour depuis le premier jour quand tu n'es pas là, dans l'absence, dans le manque, dans le noir. (43)

Nibor knows these eyes very well but has never managed to connect with them, either out of inhibition or stubbornness, trapped as she is in her own solitude.¹

One of the results of this feeling of personal disconnect put forth by L'immense fatigue des pierres is a form of itinerancy. In an article on La Québécoite, Robin's earlier novel, Janet Paterson considers the main character's standing as an immigrant in Quebec. The problem of the Québécoite's exclusion from Quebec society is, at least on one level, Paterson argues, an existential one. "Existentielle, car la narratrice n'a jamais eu de lieu d'origine: ni en Pologne, lieu de naissance de ses parents, mais non pas le sien, ni en France étant de famille d'immigrants, et ni au Québec, où elle se sent étrangère; existentielle, parce que le personnage ressent tout le poids historique de son identité juive" (54). The point seems relevant here, though what calls for elaboration is the signification of the final phrase, "le poids historique de son identité juive." Robin herself has examined her own itinerant tendencies, what it is that keeps her in a perpetual state of movement (Vous 111). While she recognizes that the threat of Nazism that she lived through as a young child is no longer present, she remains insurmountably perturbed by the more latent forms of anti-Semitism that she continues to come across. This is the nature of trauma, she argues. One does not easily recover from the experience of persecution (117). And she understands that a great deal of the migration and wandering that occurs in her writing is there to offset the impossibility of fitting in, "pour occulter les blancs d'une identité blessée dès le départ" (120). The image that best captures this condition in "L'immense fatigue des pierres" appears in Nibor's dream—the scene of the Exodus in reverse, as she deems it—where a boat of aged survivors is observed leaving port in Israel. They are not from Israel, do not recognize Israel as a site of origin. Yet they do not clearly belong anywhere else either. They are condemned to a type of

vagrancy. They are a sort of mobile Yad Vashem that the world no longer wishes to listen to. “Ils sont devenus Monument à eux seuls, déjà entrés dans le mythe, ne servant plus qu’au mythe. Alors on les renvoie ailleurs, toujours ailleurs, là où ils ne pourront jamais gêner personne” (18). If there is any irony to Nibor’s vision, it is that she does not place herself amongst these travellers, and remains resolutely on shore and separate, unable to fully grasp how the experience of the war is still with her.

While the collection will depict some of the pleasures associated with nomadism, its characters’ itinerancy cannot be seen as growing strictly out of a simple fondness for movement. Nibor at times will idealize her transience: “Nous sommes des errantes, des étoiles filantes, toujours à côté de nos pompes, de nos lieux, de nos langues” (11), she claims of Yaël and herself. “Mes racines sont en l’air dans le vide, partout et nulle part dans l’impatience des lilas, dans le vide de nos espérances fatiguées, dans nos piétinements maladroits. [. . .] Mes racines sont en l’air, sans identité et sans lieu” (30), she will say elsewhere, aestheticizing her rootlessness. Yet her own motivations for emigrating from France to America, then wishing to move back to France are contradictory, and perhaps influenced by a kind of nostalgia. Growing in age, she has little other reason to relocate to Reillane. Although she claims to have grown tired of New York (29) (and the narrator in the final passage will confirm this [45]), she also concedes that she will have difficulty leaving behind the life she has made for herself in America (42). Maybe Reillane appeals through memories of summer vacations and of Yaël’s early childhood. It is the site of her dead husband’s burial, and the house itself is invested with a sense of origins (29-30). Earlier, Nibor had, in passing, touched on what may be the true reason for her travels—the need to lose herself, “le besoin de perdre ses traces” (12). She seems to be trying to escape her past, her sense of existence, and

perhaps even her Jewishness in some way. And, as she prepares to leave for France as Yaël relocates to New York, she also appears to be running from her daughter. Yaël would seem to represent a ‘trace’ of a distinct past that will not allow itself to be forgotten, and must therefore be avoided.

In fact, both women have grown disillusioned with their living conditions. Israel has become uninhabitable for its own reasons (30, 46), and Paris has changed too much politically to make such a return feasible for either of the characters (46-7). As Nibor puts it: “Il me faut un coin où l’Histoire cesse d’enfoncer ses vrilles dans la chair humaine, un coin d’ombre amnésique, idyllique, une éternité suspendue pour mes remémorations incertaines” (30). In a very similar manner, Robin speaks of the search in her writing for “des lieux d’ancrage à la place de ces non-lieux de la mémoire que sont la Pologne, l’Europe centrale et orientale, non-lieux où il n’y a plus rien.” She seeks out those settings that most resemble the fragmented and hybrid forms that she employs in her own work (Vous 120). As a result, *L’immense fatigue des pierres* offers Montreal as such a space, where the migrant in flight from the past can live at least in the illusion, if not in the hope, of having found a home (50). The city is presented as an “hors-lieu”—a temporal and cultural space akin to Homi K. Bhabha’s notion of the ‘beyond’²—though, again, as with itinerancy in the text, not without certain difficulties.

“Et puis à Montréal, on serait bien justement parce qu’on ne serait pas tout à fait ‘chez soi’, un tiers-lieu, un hors-lieu, un espace pour pouvoir respirer sans se sentir totalement concerné, un dedans-dehors,” writes the narrator in the final, metatextual passage of “L’immense fatigue des pierres.” “Non pas une France en Amérique, pas non plus une Amérique parlant français, pas ce qu’on cherche et qu’on croit trouver, toujours autre chose qui surprend.” Yet the ironic distance created by the shift in narrative voice

casts an ambiguous light on the description of the women's possible new circumstances, which grows suddenly in exuberance: "Paumées parmi des paumés, immigrantes parmi des Immigrants, dans le grand cosmopolitisme de notre âge, à la dérive, dans le devenir fragment de nos vies. Mais oui!" (48). The capitalization of the word "Immigrants" in this instance suggests the possibility that in their adoption of Montreal as a place of residency the mother and daughter may simply be transferring their loyalty from the myths of Eastern Judaism and American pop culture to the myth of postmodern multiculturalism. The story seems to warn against the utopian appropriation of the cosmopolitan cityscape.

Nevertheless, Montreal will be reintroduced later on in the collection in "Mère perdue." Michel's portrayal of the city is more detailed than that of the narrator in the first story. Having entered the city and combed it for traces of his lost mother, his perception of it is bound to be different from the initial overview. He is unimpressed upon his first arrival; Sherbrooke Street has little to offer in terms of monuments and architecture, and appears lacking in urban character (100, 102). Yet the city grows on him: he learns its history and comes to appreciate its mix of Old and New World culture. He is caught off guard when he hears Yiddish being spoken in public spaces (104) and his discovery of the city culminates in his brief encounter in the street with a group of Hasidim. The meeting reminds him of his childhood in Poland, a world he thought had disappeared permanently (109-10). Flâneur-like, Michel's slow and patient search for his mother resembles his uncovering of Montreal. He may never arrive at a full understanding of the city, just as his search for his mother will fall short—always shifting, always just beyond his reach.³

It is finally the cosmopolitan city's linguistic and temporal hybridity that becomes a source of creative potential for the narrator in *L'immense fatigue des pierres*. As Robin notes, "La culture ne se laisse vraiment saisir que de l'étranger, dans le frottement d'une langue à une autre, dans le tissage et le tressage des langues, dans le fait que la langue autre permet de rendre étrangère sa propre langue" (Speak 4). Even for the individual who can only claim to speak one language, this language is by nature constituted through its contact and exchange with difference (Robin, *Soi* 105). Its mix of languages and histories thus makes the cosmopolitan centre a fertile ground for the writer, whose constant encounter with the other infuses the spoken and written word with newness. What Robin attempts to do through her use of hybrid forms, as stated by Lise Gauvin, is to inscribe this strangeness into her work as a means of keeping it from settling into familiarity (70). In a way, such stagnancy is the problem in "*L'immense fatigue des pierres*"; the language of the worlds the two women live in has grown stultified. "Tu parles, tu parles et tu ne dis rien. Tu parles pour meubler le silence, l'angoisse entre nous" (13), Yaël complains of her mother in one instance. Indeed, Nibor herself understands the situation. "Il faudrait pouvoir recommencer le sens / Ouvrir à nouveau les mots comme des noix / Oublier les coquilles vides" (21), she writes. Language for the women in the story seems caught in the rut of historicism and myth. It is trapped in fixity and the impossibility of saying anything, because newness itself is perceived as a danger. Nibor will therefore fantasize of finding a language to 'live in.' Wary of the illusion of origins and the nostalgia of pure languages, she longs for a means of expression of her own: "S'inventer sa langue d'écrivain / Écrire dans une langue autre / Dans l'étrangeté même de l'autre" (33). It is precisely this strangeness of the French spoken in Montreal that will appeal to the story's Parisian narrator. It reminds her of Yiddish in some ways

(itself a heterogeneous language with Germanic, Hebraic and Slavic borrowings [93]), forever on the boundary between languages, a dialect or “mélange” (47).

In a similar manner, “Gratok. Langue de vie et langue de mort” will dramatize the writer’s place as poised at the convergence of languages. To some extent, the girl’s position as a victim of persecution in the story is the outcome of a death in language, of its solidification into myth and History. And the writer as an adult can be seen as having taken on the responsibility of negotiating language in an attempt to make it new, to restore its sense of difference and meaning. Language in “Gratok” is accordingly cast as a remainder of the past, as being constitutive of history. In a world where the more material traces of former times are perpetually receding, words become for the narrator one of the more important sources of historic and cultural memory. Although everything, and everyone, from the narrator’s past has disappeared or died, her mother, in particular, lives on through the narrator’s memory of her Yiddish and Polish lullabies (98). For the same reason, however, working in Yiddish directly, translating Yiddish texts, becomes too painful for the narrator. “En travaillant sur cette langue, elle les [the former speakers] rendait à la vie, mais elle se retrouvait à chaque virgule, à chaque paragraphe sur la rampe de Birkenau. Ce voyage, elle le faisait chaque jour, il était inscrit dans chaque lettre de l’alphabet. Elle étouffait” (96). She is led, at least temporarily, to give up the Yiddish language. She decides instead to try to recover the childhood language of her stuffed bear Gratok in the attempt to transmit her memories of the war through this forgotten idiom in which all can be said, and in which the distress associated with the Yiddish language can be eluded (97). This attempt to reproduce one language’s metre and imagery in another manifests itself more evidently, however, in the narrator’s recollection of her mother’s lullabies (92) and of her own time spent on the Polish plains (87),

moments lived in Yiddish but retold in French. Through this crossing of linguistic boundaries, “Gratok” succeeds in telling a piece of Yiddish history in French—two languages that were perceived earlier as antithetical by the girl herself—and the story’s narrator manages to speak briefly of her experiences during the war. Writing, the search for new language and ways of thinking, is thus put forth in L’immense fatigue des pierres as a possible means of addressing and dealing with the psychological and emotional injuries inflicted by the Holocaust, even if all the while recognizing somehow that these ultimately remain in large part unspeakable.

For Robin, writing proves to be an activity that is always in progress and never completed. With respect to her experience during the war, she writes: “je sais qu’il m’est impossible de rendre compte de ce vécu, d’essayer même de m’en approcher. Quelque chose est à la fois impossible à dire et se manifeste cependant dans toute son absolue nécessité” (Vous 120). Something comparable could be said of Robin’s attempt to deal with the idea of the self and the writing subject in L’immense fatigue des pierres. This sense of identity’s incompleteness and elusiveness is indeed central to the collection of stories and is most noticeably realized in the work’s playful use of pronouns. In a study of certain borderline cases in autobiography (particularly, autobiography written in the third person), Philippe Lejeune discusses what commonly remains implicit in the use of pronouns in autobiography. He speaks of the complexity of the written ‘I’ and of what happens when an author decides to shift to other persons—to the ‘you’ or the ‘he’ and ‘she’—in an autobiographical statement. Such changes expose the multiplicity in

enunciative positions that are most frequently resolved or controlled through the occurrence of proper nouns, to which the various pronouns can be understood to refer, or through the reader's identification of a pronoun with a distinct addressor or addressee, which serves, however, to conceal the addressor-addressee split that is inherent to any speaking subject and that is crucial to any communicative act (35-6). In a similar way, the common use of the first person in autobiography leaves the identity of the addressee undetermined (that is, whether the text is to be taken as an interior dialogue or as a communicative act with a second addressee). The "co-présence" of the first, second and third persons in the enunciative act is made somewhat more apparent when the second person is used in autobiographical discourse instead of the first, where the 'I' becomes implicit in the statement, and what can be thought of as the 'he' or 'she' behind the formerly implicit 'you' is made explicit. The writing subject may be represented by all three personal pronouns equally (36-7). The profusion of possibilities reveals, for Lejeune, what are the basic characteristics of the speaking subject: "la tension entre l'impossible unité et l'intolérable division, et la coupure fondamentale qui fait du sujet parlant un être de fuite" (38).

The first paragraph of L'immense fatigue des pierres demonstrates the manner in which the text will deal with the multiplicity latent within the written 'I':

Près de toi, je suis ramenée à un essentiel de la vie qui me dérange. Tu auras tout fait jusqu'au bout pour me briser par le dedans, en morceaux. Au dessous du silence, des tohu-bohu ratés, des possibles inaboutis, des enfouissements secrets qui blanchissent les rêves. Tu m'attendais. Opaque comme toujours, riant de nos anciens rêves. Tu me piétinais

d'avance, redonnant vie à ma mémoire inerte. Toi, quand t'es-tu mise à exister vraiment? (7)

Though the 'tu' and 'je' will eventually be identified as mother and daughter at different moments later in the story, this first passage highlights the tenseness between pronouns and addressors and addressees that will recur throughout the collection. The tone of these lines suggests that Nibor is speaking; however, there is nothing to say that the excerpt does not represent an exchange that Yaël is having with herself, or, alternately, that Robin is having with either of the characters. It would seem to be an interior dialogue, in any event, since Nibor and Yaël are not given to such intimate discussions. Indeed, any number of likely 'contexts' might be imagined for the statement. It is possible to see the pronouns simply as elements at play in the text. The initial sentence is perhaps most telling. The literal proximity of "toi" to "je" reveals the true nature of the latter—its essence—that is to say, its dispersal, "qui me dérange," which disrupts and troubles the notion of the unified 'I.' The remainder of the paragraph would seem to pit the 'tu'—once-ally turned antagonist—against the unsettled 'je' in a continued manner. In the next paragraph, Shimon (the proper noun) enters as a reference point, bringing order to the discourse, though the lines defining the pronouns throughout the collection will still frequently break down.

The pronominal tension reaches a high point in "Journal de déglingue," where the reader is given access to Nibor's personal journal. The latter will use the journal to keep track of her daily musings; yet the story soon begins to stage a kind of experimental exchange between Nibor-as-author (je) and Nibor-as-character (elle). While the division between the two will remain rather consistent throughout, the 'je' and the 'elle' will occasionally intermingle, sometimes parenthetically (137), sometimes more directly

(147-8). The situation alters dramatically, however, in the second to last journal entry, where the identities of the ‘je’ and the ‘elle’ are scrambled:

Mais oui, j’ai vu Régine Robin. Elle était ici il y a encore une demi-heure. [. . .] Moi, je suis Pamela Wilkinson, ou Emilia Morgan, ou Nancy Nibor, ou Martha Himmelfarb, ou les alias du personnage [the writing subject] quand elle prend part à des forums de discussion sur Compuserve ou sur Internet; je suis peut-être la fille de la narratrice, ou même Régine Robin si vous voulez” (157-8).

Not only are the relationships of the characters called into question but Robin herself appears as a character inside the *mise en abyme*, thoroughly crossing the frames of reference. The proper nouns cease to ground the identity of the pronouns, which, much as with the characters, are revealed for what they are—positions within a greater text, perpetually in pursuit of a fullness in identity that is unattainable.

This last passage is repeated verbatim at the end of “*Journal de déglingue*.” The story’s concluding “Why not?” (171) implies a casual acceptance of this strange reality. It suggests that, in writing, anything is possible—specifically, because the author makes it so.⁴ Full command of the written text may not be achievable, but nor does it have complete control over the author. If this is the case, the question becomes one of deciding what to make of the written text. For Robin, writing is put in the service of memory in a significant way. Catherine Mavrikakis summarizes Robin’s position: “Il faut que l’écriture empêche l’anéantissement, résiste à la suppression de l’existence,

repousse la possibilité de l'effacement de vies qui s'évanouiraient dans l'oubli, qui partiraient en fumée, comme si de rien n'était, comme si 'ça' [the events of everyday experience] n'avait pas eu lieu" (23). This struggle against the disappearance of history occurs on an individual level in L'immense fatigue des pierres in the keeping of the journal—the notebook or agenda appears in several of the stories in the collection. On one hand, the journal is a space of possibility, where Nibor can explore, for instance, the consequences of answering 'yes' instead of 'no' to a stranger's question (138). However, the trace left by the journal is also for certain characters a way of confirming one's existence. The journal form, Nibor writes, is "l'écriture de ceux qui sont sans écriture, la mémoire des amnésiques. [. . .] S'il n'y a pas de traces je n'existe pas. Il faut que je me mette moi-même en conserve, dans une boîte d'écriture: chaque jour son bocal." The point of maintaining such a record, she explains, has little to do with content or with the need to recall past events. It is the act of writing down itself that is of importance (127-8).

The collection looks at the more formal work of memorializing as well. Two problems are encountered in the text with respect to creating commemorative monuments. The first has to do with the physical memorial itself, whether it is a work of art or a museum. Such monuments are often raised not only to mark the event of the Holocaust but also to aid in the process of mourning for the survivors. However, in L'immense fatigue des pierres, these sites remain inadequate in some regard. Michel in "Le dibbouk inconnu" has visited several memorials. He understands his history as a survivor, but he has never come to terms with the loss of his family. "[I]l n'affectionnait pas les musées de l'holocauste. Du Yad Vashem à Jérusalem à celui de Paris, il était toujours resté sur sa réserve. Son deuil à lui était infaisable. Aucun rituel, aucune

bougie, aucune pierre, aucune prière n'y pourrait rien changer" (56-7). The role of the memorial is fraught with difficulties, for all acts of commemoration, as Anne Caumartin remarks, are by nature totalizing and rigidifying—a sort of “anti-mémoire,” a way of silencing the past in many cases (36). In its physical presence, something fleeting or indefinite—the memory of the deceased and the horror of the war—is made stable and tangible by the monument. Wholly contained, the thought loses what is most unsettling about it, and the memorial, in the end, only prepares the way for the memory’s dismissal. The museum is a useful tool for educating younger generations, Michel contends, but it has not helped him in mourning (68-9).

Inversely, the second problem concerning the formal remembrance of the past has to do with the volatility of historical evidence. What troubles Michel upon his visit to Auschwitz is the space’s picturesque quality. If not for the preservation of historical markers, he might never have known that anything had taken place there (58). For similar reasons, he is reluctant to continue his trip back to his parents’ birthplace. A Polish survivor that he meets with will confirm his fear that nothing remains in Kaluszyn that might signal his family’s former existence (65). In fact, even the living survivors in some instances—a woman adopted as a child into a Polish family (64), another man, likewise adopted and become a priest (66)—do not realize that they are survivors. Virtually everything has been covered over and the past has effectively disappeared. Nibor evokes the situation in her description of Montevideo and its crumbling streets and neighbourhoods:

Une ville à l’abandon, complètement à l’abandon. Toutes les maisons anciennes sont littéralement en ruine, de vieux bow-windows éventrés, des ferronneries rouillées, le lierre prenant possession des portes de garage, la

nature reprenant sa place le long des balcons. Des jardins eux aussi à l'abandon pleins de lys sauvages. Vieilles façades art déco témoignant d'un monde enseveli. Plus rien n'est entretenu. Plus rien ne tient. (134)

Material memory is inherently unstable and forever fading. Lived memory at once eludes and outlives permanence and the evidence of the material world. No traditional monument can represent this characteristic of the past.

The past is therefore to be perpetually reshaped. Robin speaks of how certain aspects of the past will always remain undiscovered or undeciphered, and how it is necessary to remain receptive to whatever stirrings may momentarily erupt from it. “Le discours sur le passé est toujours une construction. [. . .] Il est construit en fonction des questions qu'on lui pose, en fonction des traces du passé, de la façon dont ces traces sont élaborées, dont elles sont réinterrogées” (*L'histoire* 17), she writes. Robin's task in *L'immense fatigue des pierres* is to create a memorial that remains open to this process of ongoing historical reconstruction. “Manhattan Bistro,” in particular, will deal with the question directly. The story is organized around the memory of the narrator's family and the idea of the severed family tree. With little evidence to work from—a handful of photos, documents and anecdotes (190)—the narrator attempts to fashion a family history for herself. She will revive her family through the telling of personal stories, through alternate imagined pasts (which see her mother and father safely settled in America well before the outbreak of the Second World War [177]), and the simple listing of names (181-2). There is also a constant interplay between past and present, between the family history and the contemporary urban setting, which serves to contextualize the present moment. The relation between the two periods is laid bare. Following “Journal de déglingue,” a story that is historically free-floating and self-referential (consider the

journal-entry headings: “Première journée,” “Deuxième journée,” “Dernière journée”), “Manhattan Bistro” begins with a specific place and date (“New York, le 17 octobre”), but is also grounded in literary history, as suggested by the epigraphs by Raymond Queneau and Romain Gary. Robin, the narrator, goes on to position her work amidst that of several others which is being conducted on the specific question of memory and the trace (189), situating her writing in a sort of intertextual fabric. Located within this reformulated history, she is not quite so alone in the final story. Her isolation is no longer so pronounced.

The story concludes with the fifty-one cards representing each of Robin’s family members. The blankness embodies a potential that will forever remain unfulfilled, both in terms of the lives of the dead themselves and the possibility of writing their history. The cards’ persistent blankness seems to recognize that the story is always in excess of the signifiers that tell it. Their silence is mutable. Their verticality on the page is stela-like, though the cards seem to share more with the journal entry than with the monument. Elsewhere, Robin refers to *L’ombre des morts*, the genealogical novel that she is working on in “Manhattan Bistro,” as “la préparation de quelque chose qui ne viendra jamais” (*Cybermigrances* 233). The moment of mourning, the story emphasizes, may never be complete. Nevertheless, the final text seems to accomplish something that is left largely undone in the other stories of *L’immense fatigue des pierres*: Robin manages to re-establish a certain sense of cultural transmission by finding a place for herself in discursive practice as well as in her family’s history. In this vein, the collection overall, its writing down, may also be taken as a tentative attempt to repel the forces of disregard and forgetfulness.

* * *

The work of memory, in the end, is a function of the greater effort of rethinking the self. As Olivier Asselin and Johanne Lamoureux note, “L’invention de soi implique l’invention d’une histoire personnelle, d’une généalogie, d’une tradition, elle implique tout un travail sur la mémoire” (in Robin, *Soi* 112). By relating her family history in this way, Robin can be seen as engaging in a process of recreating herself, reinscribing herself in a new cultural context, in a contemporary cosmopolitan space where the weight of her history is somehow attenuated by the setting’s recognition of difference as a prevailing norm. The biofiction, the generic category in which Robin situates L’immense fatigue des pierres, seems designed precisely for this sort of self-creating enterprise. Robin remarks on how her literary endeavours differ from autofiction, a term that continues to carry the connotation of a central autonomous subject:

Il s’agit de formes brèves, discontinues, de dispositifs d’éléments aux cohérences fugitives, partielles, rendant compte de la mobilité de la fluidité des identités, d’agencements de l’éphémère et du quotidien. Non pas une mise en scène de soi comme dans l’autofiction, mais un collage, un montage de poussières d’événements, des tissages et tressages de micro vérités kaléidoscopiques ne permettant ni la narration, ni l’unité de soi, que cette unité soit issue de la réalité ou qu’elle soit fictive. (capsules)

The biofiction, then, would seem to extend beyond autofiction by further distancing itself from notions of unity, whether thematic or formal, creating a sense of scattering and diffuseness in the subject rendered. The prefix bio suggests that the text is not about the author, but others. Yet the writer nevertheless finds herself within these stories in a way

that produces a feeling of interrelatedness between the author and her various characters that goes against the received notions of an autonomous writing subject.

One of the more striking features of the biofiction, and an aspect that resurfaces throughout Robin's writing, is the biographeme (capsules)—elements (the roundup of Jews in the Vélodrome d'hiver, whiskey, menthol cigarettes, lilacs, the bay window) that acquire meaning through their simple reoccurrence throughout Robin's various works.⁵ The biographeme lends a disorienting, labyrinthian quality to Robin's overall corpus, which comes to function as a nexus of texts that has no clear centre and that offers no way of separating the personal from the public, fiction from non-fiction, artistic practice from academic. No definite genres apply, the only rule being the consistent defiance of expectations. According to Robin, such hybrid and oneiric forms are the only means of representing the fractured and dislocated condition of the Jewish identity following the Holocaust (sujet 103).⁶ The Jewish subject that emerges in L'immense fatigue des pierres through the work's superimposition of narrators is therefore shifting and multiform. The image of the palimpsest, which recurs throughout the final two stories (135, 150, 170, 193, 197, 198, 204), would seem to be indicative of this conception of the self, substituting for the former hard nut of the universal subject. In this manner, the Jewish identity in L'immense fatigue des pierres becomes emblematic of the self in general in the present age, "un prototype du moi postmoderne," as Jacques le Rider puts it (in Robin, *Soi* 111). The subject is dispersed, under perpetual reconstruction, and governed by a different set of conventions.

Chapter Five

Conclusion

“Living at the borders means that one constantly threads the fine line between positioning and de-positioning,” writes Trinh T. Minh-ha. “[O]ne sees oneself in constant metamorphosis, as if driven by the motion of change to places so profoundly hybrid as to exceed one’s own imagination” (12-3). Trinh’s comment is readily applied to the experience of each of the main characters in All That Matters, Monkey Beach and L’immense fatigue des pierres. Life on the boundary in these works is shown to be complex and shifting, each text demonstrating how ambiguous an entity cultural identity is, how unstable and unavoidably tainted it is by the presence of the other.

Language, in particular, occupies a central role as an indicator of cultural complexity in each work. Cultural hybridity manifests itself through linguistic contact and exchange, and cultural identity is shown to acquire meaning, much like language itself, through a process of differentiation. Yet the hybrid does not always reflect an equal distribution of power between its contributing cultural systems, and life in the intercultural spaces of Kitamaat and Chinatown, especially, is marked by a loss of language, one that can be understood in the opposing terms of assimilation and acculturation. Lisamarie has lost her language as a result of colonialism and its attempt to absorb First Nations people into dominant culture. (Her exclusion from mainstream society is perhaps less of an issue for her than it is for Kiam in All That Matters, since she has less of an interest in participating in it. However, the social and legal exclusion can be seen as having an overall effect on her community. The problem may have less of an impact on Lisamarie herself, whose immediate family has managed to find a place for itself in Kitamaat despite the adversity, but it is still a source of distress to most of her friends.) Kiam, by comparison, loses his ability to speak Chinese (at least his grandmother’s ancient dialects) because of an attraction to Western culture and the

English language that results from a desire to identify with the other children at his multi-ethnic school and the images he encounters at the movie theatre. Where Lisamarie seems to embody a melding of cultures, Kiam is caught between competing loyalties, unable to find that sense of a resting place that Lisamarie, at least tentatively, appears to arrive at at the end of Monkey Beach.

Wayson Choy, Eden Robinson and Régine Robin approach the issue of history in somewhat different ways as well. Choy's work would seem to deal with the past in the most direct manner through its depiction of the lives of those affected by the Chinese Exclusion Act during the first half of the twentieth century. Robinson, for her part, is hampered in this regard because of the way in which history has so thoroughly solidified for the Aboriginal writer.¹ The past is nevertheless at hand in Monkey Beach, even if it somehow remains at the edge of the narrative for the most part, only momentarily coming forth to show how the problems of the present continue to be bound up with those of previous times. L'immense fatigue des pierres engages in a struggle with history from another standpoint, attempting to keep the memory of the Second World War from disappearing from Western consciousness. In this manner, each of the works is perhaps also involved in a similar effort, which is to reveal how cultural identity is not an ahistorical condition, that its development involves a history of cultural exchange, that it is transitory and situated in time, that to understand identity, one must understand its history.

Another concern shared by the three works is for the problem of cultural transmission when one generation is cut off from the knowledge and history of its predecessors. In Monkey Beach and L'immense fatigue des pierres, this interruption has been produced by external forces. With All That Matters, tradition for the younger

characters has in some ways simply grown irrelevant to their lived experience. However, as the tea-making scene suggests at the end of the novel, where Kiam is depicted as moving about comfortably in the space of the kitchen formerly occupied by his grandmother (412-3), tradition may have been passed on to Kiam unconsciously, reaffirming the observation of Robin's father "que la transmission s'il y en a une ne se fait que dans les blancs" (217). Transmission may not be something that can be entirely willed, but is a circumstance that in large part occurs on its own.² In Monkey Beach, there is the ineluctable sense that a way of life has grown distant, even if not fully lost. For Lisamarie, cultural recovery and transmission may now only be possible through the English language. Appropriately, Monkey Beach—tucked away and remote from village life—represents a site in the novel where this restoration may take place—a liminal space of transition between the non-human realms of water, forest and sky.³ The dilemma with regard to transmission in L'immense fatigue des pierres, and the necessity for a new sort of cultural practice, is reflected in the difficulty that Robin's family has in maintaining the custom of the Kaddish, which is associated with folkloric conceptualizations of Jewishness. ("Je ne veux pas dire le Kaddish. / Je ne veux pas devenir un musicien traditionnel. / Je ne veux pas porter le caftan" (213), declares Robin's father in one instance.) In the end, each of the texts is taken up with the need to approach tradition in a different manner. In each work, writing itself—the telling of the story—is put forth as a form of resistance and cultural preservation in the face of the encroachment of dominant culture's homogenizing forces.

Perhaps most emblematic of the positions in which the characters of Choy, Robinson and Robin find themselves are the 'paper' lives that the members of Chinatown in All That Matters are forced to lead, which dramatize that division that exists between

what the subject is and what the world says it is. Two worlds are thus shown to coexist, the 'veritable' life of Chinatown and the image of that life that is presented to the menacing outside world. It is a division, however, that is not always so clearly detected, especially for the younger generation of characters who no longer possess the skills to decipher these intricate cultural workings. In a way, both All That Matters and L'immense fatigue des pierres (with its crucial scene between Nibor, Pamela Wilkinson and Emilia Morgan) stress what faith is customarily placed in the narratives that people tell of one another. Conceivably, it is through this recognition of the enunciative split that the requirement for different modes of cultural representation and interaction can be addressed. Various critics have grappled with the conundrum of wishing to write about their own specific experiences without being categorized as 'ethnic' authors (Robin, Postface 211). Eleanor Ty, for instance, points to the need "to resist performing typically Oriental or ethnic roles without rejecting the everyday little acts that constitute one's self" (10) as being one of the greater quandaries presently surrounding the issue of self-representation. Similarly, Trinh observes that "The question as to when one should 'mark' oneself (in terms of ethnicity, age, class, gender, or sexuality, for example), and when one should adamantly refuse such markings, continues to be a challenge" (8). To this end, Judith Butler has suggested, in a somewhat different context, the necessity to "think a world in which acts, gestures, the visual body, the clothed body, the various physical attributes usually associated with gender [or race], express nothing" (414). While valid in some measure, such a stance nevertheless elides the extent to which the subject continues to depend on the other for its sense of selfhood, for that feeling of occupying a distinct place in the world. What is finally required is perhaps a sort of middle ground, resembling in its effect what Homi K. Bhabha has referred to as a Third

Space, which compels the subject to consciously hold a position at the edge of understanding in its relation to the world, and where not only differences, but similarities can also be taken into account—commencing with an acknowledgement of the “symbol-forming activity” that is constitutive of all cultures and that allows for their interaction to begin with (Bhabha, *Third* 210).

With respect to the fictional works studied in this thesis, each deals in a distinct manner with the weight of existence at the margins of Western dominant culture, and the ways in which lives are impaired to varying degrees by this association as a result of different types of aggression—sometimes physical, sometimes social and symbolic. And the characters have had to learn to cope with being at the short end of a relationship that was never meant to be egalitarian. Out of this experience would seem to grow a certain kind of knowledge—of oneself, of others—that allows for the continued negotiation of everyday living at both the individual and collective levels. What remains to be seen outside the literary text is if and how such forms of knowledge can be brought together by cultural groups and to what effect. It seems important, in any event, to persist in the search for such similarities or points of contact, for it is precisely from the perspective of these shared spaces that real differences can be assessed and evaluated. This thesis has not set out to identify these shared spaces as a primary objective (constrained as I am in this regard by my own experience), but perhaps this concluding chapter will have suggested a few starting points. The question, it would seem, is not necessarily to overcome cultural differences, but to learn to accommodate them through continued discourse.

Notes

Chapter One

¹ See Gregg.

² The development is reflected in the proliferation of terms that is encountered in the attempt to designate this idea of intermingling. Martin Heidegger speaks of “the boundary” as “that from which something begins its presencing” (in Bhabha, Location 1), Edward W. Said of “the lines between cultures” (Culture 15). Stuart Hall uses the terms “articulation” (14) and “point of suture” (5). Toni Morrison and Sidonie Smith refer respectively to “the join” (in Bhabha, Location 27) or the “margin [of] a joining/separating” (10). Bhabha writes of “the ‘middle passage’ of contemporary culture” (Location 8).

³ While Butler’s work focuses on gender identity, much of what she has written has been applied to the discourse on race and ethnicity. As Ty comments, “Butler’s observations about gendered identity apply equally well to racialized subjectivity, as race and gender and other categories operate simultaneously” (xii).

Chapter Two

¹ Glenn Deer, Choy’s interviewer, uses an alternate spelling in referring to this dialect of the Toishan region in Southern China.

² Kiam attempts to translate the print on an apple crate for his grandmother in one instance, by which the Fraser Valley Eden Farm is said to be “the Big Paradise Apple-Box of Upside-down Mountain” (70). Rob Appleford notes how a similar linguistic barrier will affect Lisamarie in Monkey Beach (100n5).

³ Consider how Poh-Poh conceals her “bitter anger” towards Mrs. Chong (184), or what seems like the group’s ongoing digging for details to fuel the rumour mill (87-90).

The mahjong table is idealized in The Jade Peony (61-2); All That Matters will expose its other side.

⁴ In The Jade Peony, Sekky reflects on Meiyong's comparable situation:

If her widowed mother [Mrs. Lim], with her deep village loyalties and Old China superstitions, found out about Kazuo, she would spit at Meiyong, tear out her own hair, and be the second mother to disown her.

If Chinatown found out, Meiyong would be cursed and shamed publicly as a traitor; she would surely be beaten up, perhaps branded with a red-hot iron until her flesh smoked and flamed. (255)

Desire for a white man can only be a little less damning than desire for a Japanese one. And, in this respect, Liang's naïve yet equally gossipy presence may be as menacing as Mrs. Lim's.

⁵ Jenny will offer her own version of the fragmented montage when she smashes a drinking glass against her bedroom wall out of frustration with Kiam and her mother (416).

Chapter Three

¹ Oddly enough, the hike "up the power lines"—a clear-cut leading to an Alcan hydro dam—is Lisamarie's "favourite" and is appreciated for the view it gives onto the village (214). While the Western presence that Lisamarie in some way scorns has drastically affected the landscape, it has also brought advantages that she seeks to participate in.

² The unconscious thus comes to act as a point of contact between the two cultures as well because of the privilege it grants to dreams—likewise important sources of Haisla knowledge in Monkey Beach—as a way of access to latent forms of meaning.

³ In a way, Lisamarie's character may represent an attempt to resuscitate these legendary figures, aligned as she is with the monstrous and the trickster on different occasions in the novel, leaping from her brother's closet in a monkey mask to terrify Jimmy and his friends at one point (168), even biting into Frank's backside (65) and Jimmy's hand (347) at others in a manner that echoes B'gwus and T'sonoqua's reputed taste for human flesh. Appleford speaks at length of Lisamarie's association with the b'gwus in Monkey Beach, and Andrews likewise refers to Lisamarie's identification with T'sonoqua in terms of a "resurrect[ion]" (18).

Chapter Four

¹ This final excerpt also indicates the possibility that Nibor is aestheticizing her failed relationship with her daughter, much as she will do elsewhere in the treatment of her own itinerancy.

² Montreal is located peripherally to the symbolic economy of global culture as experienced in Paris or New York, yet it is near enough to provide a sense of perspective on the activities of these two centres. The city is caught in a moment of oscillation, so to speak, between East and West, old and new. Anne Caumartin, in a manner similar to Bhabha, connects the hors-lieu to "un va-et-vient entre les cultures" (42).

³ In this manner, by juxtaposing the Montreal of "L'immense fatigue des pierres" with that of "Mère perdue," the collection sets up an opposition between types of cosmopolitan space that resembles the distinction that Bhabha makes between a global cosmopolitanism, "founded on ideas of progress that are complicit with neo-liberal forms of governance, and free-market forces of competition" (Location xiv), and a vernacular cosmopolitanism, "which measures global progress from the minoritarian perspective" (xvi).

⁴ Robin cautions that what can be said of the written 'I' does not always strictly carry over to the subject (Cybermigrances 63).

⁵ The biographeme is a concept that Robin borrows from Roland Barthes (Cybermigrances 225).

⁶ The narrator of La Québécoite states:

Il n'y a pas de métaphore pour signifier Auschwitz pas de genre, pas d'écriture. Écrire postule quelque part une cohérence, une continuité, un plein du sens [. . .]. Rien qui puisse dire l'horreur et l'impossibilité de vivre après. Le lieu entre le langage et l'Histoire s'est rompu. Les mots manquent. Le langage n'a plus d'origine ni de direction. (141)

Chapter Five

¹ Thomas King suggests why the return to the past is largely unproductive for the Aboriginal writer:

It would seem reasonable to expect Native writers to want to revisit and reconstruct the literary and historical past, but oddly enough [. . .] contemporary Native writers have shown little interest in using the past as setting, preferring instead to place their fictions in the present. [. . .] I think that, by the time Native writers began to write in earnest and in numbers, we discovered that the North American version of the past was too well populated, too well defended. [. . .] Native writers who went to that past ran into the demand that Indians had to be noble and tragic and perform all their duties on horseback. [. . .][Thus,] Native writers began to use the Native present as a way to resurrect a Native past and to imagine a Native future. (105-6)

King goes on to speak of the established tendency to “creat[e] small panoramas of contemporary Native life by looking backward and forward with the same glance” (112).

² Indeed, both All That Matters and Monkey Beach demonstrate how the formation of identity is an interpellated process, neither Kiam nor Lisamarie ever being completely aware of the ways in which they are being led to perform their social roles in the novels.

³ Coral Ann Howells makes a similar observation (193).

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