

Contacting the Dead:

Echoes from the Haisla Diaspora in Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach*

by

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis was to posit an explanation of recurrent liminal imagery in Eden Robinson's novel *Monkey Beach* by exploring the ways that the text can be read as an expression of diasporic awareness. The Haisla in *Monkey Beach* experience a form of exile that is atypical because it occurs within the limits of their homeland. This thesis explores the dimensions of this exile by examining the ways that the Haisla community's connection to its homeland has been altered in the wake of colonial contact. In *Monkey Beach* the Haisla diaspora is present in the juxtaposition of traditional narratives with the current realities of post-contact Canadian society, in the novel's assessment of the ongoing repercussions of residential schools, and in the cross-cultural resonances that emerge from the narrator's descriptions of and interactions with the spirit world. What this study revealed is that although *Monkey Beach* exposes disruptions in the connections between the Haisla and their homeland, the adaptation of Aboriginal storytelling techniques to the form of the novel represents both a positive continuation of indigenous traditions and an active resistance of cultural erasure.

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## Introduction: Conceptualizing the Haisla Diaspora

Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach* is a novel that is pervaded by liminality. Even the title of the novel is derived from liminal space. A beach is a zone that exists between water and land, while combining aspects of both. And the monkeys on this particular beach are marked by liminality as well, for they are not mere monkeys but Sasquatches, mythical primates that traverse the boundaries between human and animal. These types of blurry distinctions abound in *Monkey Beach*, and the uncertainties they represent are a reflection of the social and cultural turmoil experienced by the characters in the novel. In all of its intricacies and ambiguities, *Monkey Beach* is a portrait of a culture in exile, but it is an exile that is practically invisible because it is occurring precisely in the Haisla nation's place of origin. Lisamarie's narrative describes a community that is still in the process of resettling under the weight of colonial influence. At the time of the novel's present, what was once a Haisla nation unto itself has become a small fishing village nestled at the limit of colonial expansion, and the community that resides there has been pushed into diaspora.

The emergence of European culture as the dominant paradigm in a burgeoning Canadian nation certainly created circumstances in which the sense of social dislocation experienced by Aboriginal peoples is comparable to that experienced by communities living in exile within foreign countries. Some might argue that these similarities are not enough to support the application of the term diaspora, but a close look at the term's meaning can show how relevant it really is. In its earliest use the term diaspora refers to the "dispersal of Jews from their Holy Land (and homeland) in Judea, beginning a period of Babylonian exile" (Brazier 13). Subsequently the definition of diaspora has grown to include many diverse cultural communities living in exile. In his essay "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return,"

William Safran provides six key criteria that expand the notion of what constitutes a diaspora.

Safran posits his list of criteria as follows:

I suggest that [...] the concept of diaspora be applied to expatriate minority communities whose members share several of the following characteristics: 1) they, or their ancestors, have been dispersed from a specific original ‘center’ to two or more ‘peripheral,’ or foreign, regions; 2) they retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland—its physical location, history, and achievements; 3) they believe that they are not—and perhaps cannot be—fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it; 4) they regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return—when conditions are appropriate; 5) they believe that they should, collectively, be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland and to its safety and prosperity; and 6) they continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another, and their ethnocommunal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship. (83)

While largely ignored in general discussions of diaspora, Aboriginal communities often exhibit nearly all of the characteristics listed above. However, the first criterion, requiring dispersal, can be somewhat problematic especially with regards to communities like the Haisla nation in *Monkey Beach*. The Haisla continue to reside in the same location that they have occupied for thousands of years. Yet, despite this geographical continuity, the Haisla have been placed in a diasporic position as a result of colonial appropriations and cultural influences.

Even though the Haisla have not been moved geographically they have been moved ideologically. In his essay “Coming Home Through Stories” Neal McLeod identifies the ways that the act of storytelling contributes to the conceptualization of ideological homelands:

Stories act as the vehicles of cultural transmission by linking one generation to the next.

There are many levels to the stories, and many functions to them: they link the past to the present, and allow the possibility of cultural transmission and of “coming home” in an ideological sense. Our task today is to retrieve tribal narratives and paradigms, and to reaffirm our tribal identities in the face of the overwhelming pressure of diaspora. (31)

Neal McLeod believes that for Aboriginal communities the notion of “home” is as much a part of a people’s stories as it is about physical location: “Stories give us voice, hope, and a place in the world. To tell stories is to remember. We owe it to those still unborn to remember, so that they will have a home in the face of diaspora” (*Cree Narrative Memory* 70). In many ways *Monkey Beach* is an example of the kind of retrieval McLeod is positing. The novel does portray a community that is haunted by the ghosts left behind by centuries of colonial interference, but it also shows how literature and storytelling can be used to link the past and the present as McLeod suggests. By means of its depictions of the present state of Haisla culture in contrast with Lisamarie’s revelations about her people’s past, *Monkey Beach* not only draws our attention to the ways that the Haisla community has changed, but the novel also demonstrates how traditional stories can retain their relevance within the context of modern literature. The result of the overlap between a past that is kept alive through stories and a present that is troubled by the aftershocks of colonial contact is a diasporic perspective that is unusually immediate in its connections to a narrative homeland.

The atypical nature of the Haisla diaspora stems in part from the fact that the disruption of Haisla culture began with colonization rather than migration. The process of colonization in British Columbia was riddled with misconceptions concerning the nature of local Aboriginal communities. One of the most significant of these misconceptions resulted from the failure to recognize the reason that there were so few Aboriginal people living in the province. Many Aboriginal communities had already been decimated by disease before Europeans began to settle within British Columbia in full force. In *Aboriginal Peoples and Politics*, Paul Tennant explains that colonial officials

have consistently underestimated the original aboriginal population of British Columbia. Until recently the accepted estimate was less than 100,000. The low number resulted in part from failure to recognize the extent of early post-contact epidemics and in part from the scarcity of archeological [sic] research, but it served as well the implicit purpose of demeaning aboriginal claims and buttressing white myths. (3)

Perhaps the myth that has the most consequences is derived from the notion that “the ‘Indian problem’ would ultimately vanish with the Indians themselves” (39). The belief that First Nations communities along the west coast were already in the process of dying out contributed to a false sense of security among colonial officials concerning the Aboriginal presence in the province. While it is true that during the early phases of colonization nearly one third of the original Aboriginal population of British Columbia succumbed to various epidemics resulting from a lack of natural immunities to diseases such as smallpox, after the epidemics had run their course nearing the end of the nineteenth century the population of Aboriginal people living in the province began to rise once again (Duff 59-63). What the colonizers failed to realize was that the greatest strength of these people does not reside in their numbers alone but also grows out of the

richness and diversity of their cultural practices. The traditions that define the Aboriginal communities along the west coast provided them with a sense of identity that was cohesive enough to carry them through the epidemic years.

The false impression that Aboriginal communities in British Columbia were on the brink of an inevitable extinction had mixed consequences. On one hand, Paul Tennant asserts that “this comforting assumption was very likely in the minds of provincial officials as they casually ignored or dismissed Indian land claims” (40). On the other hand, the false sense of security promoted by these misguided notions also prompted officials to largely ignore entire Aboriginal communities for decades even after the colonization of the province had begun en masse. Paul Tennant examines the implications of this oversight in some detail:

In almost every Indian community [in British Columbia] there are still elders who as children were taught by parents or grandparents who had grown to adulthood in self-governing communities free of control by Whites. Moreover, although the Whites brought devastating diseases and disruptive change, there was no armed conquest, no widespread displacing of villages, and relatively little forced admixing of differing communities. The aboriginal past was not cut off. Many aboriginal communities remained resident on ancestral sites. They could thus more easily keep alive their ways, their memories, and their ideals. (3)

The Haisla nation, centred in Kitamaat village, is a perfect example of the type of community Tennant describes. The Haisla have inhabited the area surrounding the head of the Douglas Channel for thousands of years, and have a continuous cultural history that spans that entire time. These circumstances contribute to the Haisla community’s move into diaspora in an odd manner. The Euro-Canadian cultural hubris that causes places like Kitamaat to remain under the colonial

radar allows for the uninterrupted transmission of collective memory through storytelling and other communal activities. But at the same time, communities like the Haisla nation are not destined to remain in relative isolation forever, and once the colonial juggernaut reaches their borders, the perspective provided by the collective memory shared in these communities makes the ultimate results of colonial impact much more recognizable.

It is in the disconnect between the present state of the Haisla communities and the memory of what they once were that the true form of their exile begins to take shape. Although the Haisla retain a portion of their ancestral territory, this does not mean they have remained untouched by colonial influences. The area surrounding Kitamaat village is rich with natural resources and as the colonization of British Columbia progressed it was inevitable that the Haisla way of life would be impacted by colonial culture. *Monkey Beach* is a novel that emerges out of the cultural overlap resulting from over a century of colonial contact. While Haisla culture continues to be strongly represented in Kitamaat, it now must contend with the larger presence of the Canadian national identity. In his essay “Coming Home Through Stories,” Neal McLeod writes that “often when one group becomes dominated by another, the dominated group tends to lose some of its narratives; history shows that the dominator imposes its narratives upon the dominated group” (18). *Monkey Beach* is in many ways an expression of this relationship between divergent cultural narratives. The novel itself is as much a Haisla story as are the more traditional stories that Lisamarie learns from her grandmother Agnes or Ma-ma-oo. The only tangible difference is that Lisamarie’s story has to account for an entirely different set of cultural references that have been superimposed over pre-existing Haisla narratives. According to Neal McLeod, “‘To be home’ means to dwell within the landscape of the familiar, a landscape of collective memories; it is an oppositional concept to being in exile. ‘Being home’ means to be a

nation, to have access to land, to be able to raise your own children, and to have political control” (*Coming Home* 17). The intrusion of colonial narratives and systems of governance contributes to the defamiliarization of cultural landscapes, thereby alienating aboriginal peoples from their homes. The result is an ideological exile and an ostensibly invisible Aboriginal diaspora. This thesis is an examination of the ways that *Monkey Beach* functions as a representation of a culture that is in exile on its own land.

The first chapter of this thesis focuses on how Lisamarie, as the narrator of the novel, defines her community and is in turn defined by it. Lisamarie’s attempts to locate her hometown of Kitamaat British Columbia for the reader illuminate a conflict between colonial and Aboriginal worldviews that cannot be easily resolved. A complex history is hidden underneath what is shown on current maps of Kitamaat and its surrounding area. As *Monkey Beach* unfolds, Eden Robinson reveals a number of colonial and corporate misrepresentations that alter the relationships between the Haisla people and the land they inhabit. Lisamarie provides a wealth of information about Haisla traditions and environmental interactions, but these revelations are always framed within an overarching colonial context. Lisamarie’s world is divided between the colonial maps that are ubiquitous in modern society and the descriptive maps that come out of indigenous knowledge of the environment. Lisamarie demonstrates that conventional maps are riddled with colonial misappropriations, but she also provides alternatives to colonial methods of compartmentalizing the natural environment. By filling in the spaces on the map with details that emerge from a purely Haisla perspective, Lisamarie unsettles the notion of absolute colonial authority. Haisla traditions and collective memory imbue the Kitamaat landscape with an Aboriginal presence that cannot be easily erased by the trappings of colonialism; however, the living history that grows out of Haisla awareness also provides a stark reminder of how much

colonization has altered the cultural map of Haisla territory. Within the overlapping presence of both traditional Haisla conceptions of the environment and colonial impositions upon that same environment lies the reality of the Haisla diaspora.

Chapter two deals with a far more literal form of exile. *Monkey Beach* takes place after residential schooling has been discontinued in Canada, but the effects of the removal of children from their homes and families and the abuses and cultural suppression that occurred in these institutions are still very much present in the Haisla community. Residential school casts a shadow that hangs over nearly everything that happens in *Monkey Beach*. As Lisamarie's narrative progresses she pieces together a puzzle concealing a legacy of intergenerational sexual abuse that has far-reaching consequences for the entire Kitimaat community. Perhaps most importantly, this novel reveals the dangers inherent to the silence that the victims of abuse maintain out of fear of stigmatization.

Much is hidden in the murky waters of *Monkey Beach*, so in an effort to contextualize the tragedies that result from an unspoken history of residential school abuse this chapter will also examine two other texts, Jane Willis' *Geniesh: An Indian Girlhood* and Robert Alexie's *Porcupines and China Dolls*. These novels tell the story that remains concealed behind the pages of *Monkey Beach*, thus further fleshing out the role that residential schooling plays in the formation of a Canadian Aboriginal diaspora. Perhaps more so than any other element in Robinson's text, the residential school experience is representative of the notion of impossible homecomings. The characters who have returned to Kitimaat after attending residential school all exhibit forms of social dislocation to varying degrees. After years of separation, cultural suppression, and various forms of abuse, these characters no longer quite fit into the fabric of the community to which they are returning. Even though the residential schools are now closed, the

horrors that occurred there can never be fully left behind. Once these characters return “home”, the physical exile of being removed from their families in the first place is replaced by a social exile that, within the context of the novel at least, is never fully rectified. Tragedy lies at the heart of *Monkey Beach*, and the intergenerational repercussions of residential schooling provide the key to unlocking the novel’s greatest tragedy.

Finally, the third chapter delves into the significance of the paranormal elements that help make this novel so intriguing. Lisamarie talks to ghosts and is visited by spirit creatures several times in *Monkey Beach* and these encounters provide unique glimpses into the interstices created by her position as both a member of the Haisla community and a participant in globalized popular culture. Within the Haisla worldview, spirits and ghosts are a natural part of the world around us, but when Lisamarie first begins to encounter these creatures she does not possess the requisite knowledge to place them in the correct context. Her only outlet for rectifying this deficiency is her grandmother, but Lisamarie’s traditional education is cut short by Ma-ma-oo’s death. The fear and hesitancy with which Lisamarie approaches her encounters with ghosts and spirit creatures is a reflection of the cultural ambiguities she faces as both a member of the Haisla community and a child of the late twentieth century. In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha writes that “the truest eye may now belong to the migrant’s double vision” (7-8). Lisamarie possesses her own form of double vision, but rather than emerging from the turmoil of migrancy hers is born out of the overlap between the land of the living and the spirit world that she alone is able to witness. This dual nature provides her with a unique perspective on the ongoing processes of cultural evolution. Although the world is constantly changing, there is still a place for the creatures, like the b’gwus, that inhabit the oldest Haisla stories. The b’gwus, or Sasquatch, is particularly relevant because it is shown to traverse the line between two worlds. Near the end of

the novel Lisamarie describes the b'gwus as “not quite human, not quite wolf, but something in between” (374). The b'gwus, in its liminal form of existence, is a perfect counterpart for Lisamarie as she progresses on her journey of self-discovery. The quest to uncover the fate of her missing brother leaves Lisamarie stranded on the shores of Monkey Beach. The novel closes with the narrator trapped in a liminal landscape while she herself hovers in an unresolved space between life and death. Lisamarie never escapes the ambiguities that permeate this text, and her uncertain fate is a fitting expression of the cultural flux that defines our “post”colonial<sup>1</sup> world.

Although the form of the Haisla diaspora is somewhat unconventional, this does not make the cultural disruptions inherent to it any less real. Exile is as much, if not more, a state of psychological dislocation as it is geographical. *Monkey Beach* reveals how the Haisla have endured both of these aspects of diasporic exile. The juxtaposition of colonial cognitive maps alongside pre-existing indigenous ones contributes to the psychological alienation of the Haisla from the land that they have inhabited for thousands of years. Additionally, the physical removal of children from their homes and families in order to attend schools that are specifically mandated to be entirely dissociated from Aboriginal culture constitutes an exile that is both psychological *and* geographical simultaneously. While only a few of the characters depicted in *Monkey Beach* are explicitly shown to have attended residential school, the fallout from their experiences impacts the entire community. The cumulative result of all of these circumstances is a community of individuals who have become exiled on their own land. The cultural interstices that Lisamarie navigates during the course of her narrative manifest themselves most clearly in her interactions with the spirit world and the creatures that originate therein. As Haisla stories

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<sup>1</sup> I have placed the word “post” in quotation marks in recognition of the fact that many Aboriginal scholars believe that there is no post-colonial Native literature. This perspective is expressed quite effectively by Thomas King in his essay “Godzilla vs. Post-Colonial”.

transform in order to accommodate the realities of colonization, the ultimate product is an increasingly undeniable state of cultural hybridity the implications of which have yet to be fully understood.

## Chapter One Location: Mapping the Haisla Diaspora

The liminal imagery and ideas in *Monkey Beach* result mainly from Lisamarie's double vision that emerges from her cultural awareness of both the traditions of the Haisla community to which she belongs, and the "post" colonial society that envelops this community. The Haisla worldview is strongly represented in *Monkey Beach*, yet Lisamarie cannot help framing her description of her homeland within a colonial context. While trying to orient the reader in terms of the physical location of Kitamaat British Columbia, Lisamarie reveals a long and ongoing history of colonial interference. Like the beach that exists somewhere between the sea and the land, Lisamarie's cultural position is located somewhere in the interstices created by the juxtaposition of Aboriginality and coloniality. The region around Kitamaat bears the marks of both the Haisla and their subsequent colonial neighbours to such a great extent that a complete physical or ideological separation is no longer possible. The complexities resulting from the misuse and misappropriation of names, the misrecognition of monstrosity, and the inevitable ecological impact of industrialization, lead to a situation where the homeland of the Haisla is as much an idea as it is a physical reality. It is in the dialogue between Aboriginal and colonial perspectives that the presence of the Haisla diaspora begins to take shape within the pages of *Monkey Beach*.

As discussed in the introduction, diaspora is generally used to describe cultural communities that exist in exile from their homelands. The notion of exile typically connotes removal from one place to another; however, not all exiles are purely geographical in nature. In his book *Cree Narrative Memory*, Neal McLeod explains how exile can be cultural and spiritual as well as physical:

Politically, ideologically, and economically, Indigenous groups have often been overwhelmed by larger groups, usually nation states. One could call this the colonization of Indigenous Being (of Indigenous worldview and life-world). It is the imposition on an ancient people of a new, colonial order and a new way of making sense of the world. The effects of this spatial and spiritual exile are devastating, as the alienation exists both in our hearts (spiritual exile) and in our physical alienation from the land (spatial exile). (56)

Although Lisamarie might never realize it herself, her narrative describes a people who are living in just such a state of exile as McLeod identifies. Eden Robinson's narrator attempts to introduce the reader to Kitamaat in a manner that highlights the complex relationship between the Haisla people and the natural environment surrounding their traditional homeland. However, this is a relationship that is changing just as continuing infrastructural development changes the landscape. The juxtapositions that occur as a result of a new country being superimposed upon pre-existing cultural territories contribute to the alienation of the Haisla nation from the land that has been their home for thousands of years.

The importance of location in *Monkey Beach* is established very early. One of Lisamarie's first actions as narrator is to provide detailed instructions for locating Kitamaat on a map:

Find a map of British Columbia. Point to the middle of the coast. Beneath Alaska, find the Queen Charlotte Islands. Drag your finger across the map, across the Hecate Strait to the coast and you should be able to see a large island hugging the coast. [...] If your finger is on Prince Rupert or Terrace, you are too far north. If you are pointing to Bella Coola or Ocean Falls, you are too far south. If you are pointing in the right place, you should have your finger on the western shore of Princess Royal Island. To get to

Kitamaat, run your finger northeast, right up to the Douglas Channel, a 140-kilometre-long deep-sea channel, to its mouth. (*Monkey Beach* 4-5)

As Lisamarie describes a finger tracing over a map of British Columbia in search of Kitamaat, she begins to create an image of extreme remoteness. In her estimation it is easy to overlook Kitamaat in favour of the more immediately recognizable locations of Prince Rupert, Terrace, or even the neighbouring Alcan Aluminum “city of the future,” (5) which is also named Kitimat even though the spelling is different. Perhaps in an effort to ease the reader into this unfamiliar territory, she uses a topographical map as her initial means of locating her home for the reader. While conventional maps are readily understandable to most people, and therefore quite utilitarian in terms of providing an introduction to new territories, they are also decidedly colonial in conception. It is not mere coincidence that the Americas derive their name from mapmaker Amerigo Vespucci. Maps are such an integral component of the colonial consciousness that an entire hemisphere has been named after a cartographer. Whether she is conscious of the implications or not, when Lisamarie uses a conventional map to direct her audience to Kitamaat, she is simultaneously locating Haisla territory within a much larger colonial context.

Despite their utility, topographical maps cannot always be taken at face value. No matter how much attention to detail goes into the preparation of a map, something is inevitably left out. In order for a map to be comprehensive in its representations it would need to be ludicrous in scale. In his short work “On Rigor in Science”, Jorge Luis Borges imagines just such a map:

...In that Empire, the Art of Cartography reached such Perfection that the map of one Province took up the whole of a City, and the map of the empire, the whole of one Province. In time, those Unconscionable Maps did not satisfy and the Colleges of

Cartographers set up a Map of the Empire which had the size of the Empire itself and coincided with it point by point. Less Addicted to the Study of Cartography, Succeeding Generations understood that this Widespread Map was Useless and not without Impiety they abandoned it to the Inclemencies of the Sun and of the Winters. In the deserts of the West some mangled Ruins of the Map lasted on, inhabited by Animals and Beggars; in the whole Country there are no other relics of the Disciplines of Geography. (90)

Under the ponderous weight of such an unwieldy map, the entire “Study of Cartography” collapses within Borges’ imagined empire. In reality, maps and the lands they represent are never able to mirror each other with anything approaching verisimilitude, and so it should not be forgotten that maps are merely tools; therefore, they only truly reflect the intentions of those who wield them. Ania Loomba writes: “Maps claim to be objective and scientific, but in fact they select what they record and present it in specific ways, which are historically tied in with colonial enterprises” (69). As Borges demonstrates and Loomba reiterates, the notion of scientific accuracy in cartography is a fallacy. If maps were truly accurate, then one should expect to encounter large black lines as one crosses the border from one country to the next. No matter how unintentional the results may be, the fact remains that maps always portray specific ideas about the nature of the land they represent, and those ideas do not always correspond with reality. Within the machinations of colonial expansion, maps are so much more than mere illustrations of a desired territory. For good or ill, maps always exhibit the intentions of the authorities responsible for determining where the lines go, and because of this they should never be categorically accepted as objective truth.

Conversely, conventional maps sometimes also reveal more than was originally intended. Apart from the contours denoting elevation, most maps provide very few details about the

character of the landscapes being depicted. The names of places are present but in between lies seemingly empty space. To a certain extent, the emptiness of conventional maps can be seen as a metaphor for colonial attitudes towards new territories. From a colonial perspective, the land occupied by Aboriginal peoples was often viewed as empty because it was not being “properly” cultivated. In *Aboriginal Peoples and Politics*, Paul Tennant provides a quotation from Joseph Trutch that illustrates this attitude:

The Indians regard these extensive tracts of land as their individual property; but of by far the greater portion thereof they make no use whatever and are not likely to do so; and thus the land, much of which is either rich pasture or available for cultivation and greatly desired for immediate settlement, remains in an unproductive condition. (43)

Trutch’s conception of Aboriginal lands as unused and therefore empty is formulated in complete disregard of the traditions and generations of habitation that connect people to the territories they occupy. Conventional maps are similarly devoid of context. Perhaps it is because of this deficiency that as soon as Lisamarie begins to trace a route to Kitamaat on a map of British Columbia, she immediately feels the need to fill in the spaces on the map with contextual information such as the fact that Princess Royal Island is populated by “kermode bears, which are black bears that are usually white” (4). Such details imbue the points on the map with characteristics that they would otherwise lack and are as much a part of truly locating these places as are geographical coordinates. In this manner Lisamarie reminds us that, as Alfred Korzybski writes: “A map is *not* the territory it represents” (58). While maps are undeniably useful, care should be taken to avoid mistaking the representation for what is being represented.

Lisamarie indirectly responds to the insufficiencies of conventional maps by providing examples of an entirely different form of mapping. In a moment of recollection Lisamarie

explains what her Ma-ma-oo taught her about “the canoe shape in the mountain across the channel. She said that when the sun touched the bow, you knew the oolichans would be here. Bears woke up and eagles gathered with seagulls and crows and ravens, waiting anxiously at the rivers” (*Monkey Beach* 88). Lisamarie also reveals that Canoe Mountain is visible from her brother’s bedroom window. Thanks to the wisdom imparted by her grandmother, in addition to her own knowledge of available sightlines, a glimpse of the mountain’s distinguishing shape will provide Lisamarie with information about both the seasonal behaviour of various animals and her approximate position relative to her home.

Another example of this type of mapping is demonstrated when Lisamarie and her family go fishing for oolichans. Lisamarie informs us that “you can tell when you’re getting close to the Kitlope watershed because the water changes colour. At Kemano, the water is still a normal dark green, but the closer you get to the Kitlope, the milkier the water becomes, until all around you the water is the colour of pale jade” (111-112). Rather than imposing arbitrary lines upon the land, these maps emerge from an intimate knowledge of the environment. Because of this they are only truly useful to those who are already familiar with the specific area that they describe. From this perspective it makes sense that Lisamarie begins with a topographical map rather than one of these descriptive maps. Lisamarie assumes that her reader has never been to Kitamaat, which is fair considering the remote location of the town. Both conventional maps and descriptive maps have limitations that make them inadequate as a sole means of positioning Kitamaat for a reader who is unfamiliar with the area. Lisamarie circumvents the inadequacies of these individual mapping methods by using them in conjunction. Once Haisla territory has been located for the uninitiated in general terms, she can then begin to fill in the specific details that the Haisla use to locate themselves in relation to the landmarks that delineate their homeland.

In a way Lisamarie is employing a form of decolonization whereby the superficial lines that have been imposed upon the land are replaced with a more fundamental knowledge of what those lines are meant to represent. This movement between two different descriptive modes reveals how Lisamarie is repeatedly crossing the border between two worlds. Lisamarie demonstrates a great amount of fluency when using both colonial and indigenous forms of mapping, which speaks to her own state of cultural hybridity.

Even discounting the inevitable limitations of conventional maps as descriptive tools, the locus of Kitamaat as a unique geographical space is far from secure. The exact physical location of the Haisla nation is occluded by a number of circumstances. In *Monkey Beach*, Lisamarie explains that the Haisla people were once spread out much more broadly along the Kitimat River:

The name Haisla first appeared in print in 1848 as Hyshallain. It has alternately been spelled Haishilla in 1884, Qaila in 1890 and Ha-isla in the early 1900s. Xa'isla is actually a word for the village or the people of the village who lived at the mouth of the Kitimat River. Originally, there were also two other Haisla groups; the Nalibila, those living upriver; and the Gilda'lidox, those living in the Kildala Arm [...] Some time before the first white settlement, the three branches began to winter together at the village of the Xa'isla. [...] the Methodist missionary George Raley established a rival village on an old settlement site in present-day Kitamaat Village. Converts moved there when they became Christianized. By the early 1900s, most of the Haisla had moved to Kitamaat Mission, as the village was called. (194)

Although all of the territory described in this passage lies within the boundaries of traditional Haisla territory, the fact that Kitamaat Village was originally a missionary settlement

complicates the notion of where the Haisla homeland is actually located. The connection to Methodist missionaries places the founding of Kitamaat Village within a markedly colonial framework. It is intriguing that the name of the Haisla people is derived from the name of one of their former villages. The act of retaining this word as the name of the people themselves, rather than the place they live, demonstrates a longing within the Haisla nation to remain connected to their pre-colonial state. This longing is reminiscent of a diasporic community's efforts to maintain a link with its homeland.

Lisamarie further complicates the issue of locating the Haisla homeland when she explains that “there are about four or five different spellings of Kitamaat in the historical writings, but the Haisla decided on Kitamaat. To add to the confusion, when Alcan Aluminum moved into the area in the 1950s, it built a ‘city of the future’ for its workers and named it Kitimat too, but spelled it differently” (5). By the time Alcan becomes interested in the area, Kitamaat Village is the only home of Haisla people. Alcan's co-opting of the name of the pre-existing village is an act of erasure that a slight alteration in spelling does little to mitigate. Touting the proposed factory town as the “city of the future” automatically relegates Kitamaat Village to some vague antiquity, especially when the plan is to give the new town the same name. It is possible that naming the Alcan town Kitimat is a manifestation of the colonial belief that Aboriginal communities are a relic of the past that are fated to decline into non-existence. Whatever the reason, Alcan's choice to name the new town Kitimat shows a blatant disregard for the nearby Aboriginal community. It is almost as though the Alcan corporation deemed Kitamaat Village of such little significance that they believe that, once the new town is in place, no one will even notice that the Haisla are still there.

The psychological presence of the Alcan town for the Haisla community is represented in *Monkey Beach* in a very intriguing manner. Kitamaat Village and the Alcan town Kitimat are connected by a very perilous road. Lisamarie describes it as “an eleven-kilometre strip of concrete that winds north along the coast and over steep hills like a roller coaster” (27). Travelling on this road is a daily necessity for many people in Kitamaat Village: “Most people from the village who work in town travel this road twice a day and know its hairpin turns so well that they say they can drive it blindfolded” (27-8). The time Lisamarie’s father Albert spends “working at the potlines in Alcan” (60) makes him one of these people. The extreme familiarity that leads individuals to claim they are able to drive this treacherous stretch of road blind reveals how important this link to Alcan’s Kitimat is for many of the Haisla, but there is also a sense of urgency involved in travelling on this road:

Dad was one of those who pushed to get the speed limit raised from fifty kilometres an hour to sixty. When the safety inspector from the department of highways came out to test the road, he drove back and forth four times in a car laden with instruments, then announced that the road wasn’t even safe to drive at fifty kilometres.” (28)

While familiarity with its intricacies reduces the risks of navigating this road at higher speeds, Albert’s desire to travel at unsafe velocities carries the added implication that the link between these two towns is not expedient enough. Movement from Kitamaat to Kitimat is a necessity for all of the Haisla to varying degrees. As Lisamarie suggests, this road is mainly used to transport people to and from work. There are simply not enough employment opportunities within Kitamaat village to support all of the people who live there. The discussion of the road between the village and Alcan’s Kitimat, highlights the extent to which the “modern” town has become an integral facet of the Haisla way of life.

It may no longer be possible to pinpoint the exact reason why Alcan co-opted the name Kitimat, but the greater cultural implications of such a move are definitely worth investigating. In fact, the authority evoked from the act of naming has roots of biblical proportions. In Genesis, God provides Adam with “dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth” (1.28), and in order to solidify this dominance over all the creatures of the earth, God calls upon Adam to name them:

And out of the ground God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought *them* unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that *was* the name thereof. (2.19)

While the biblical significance of naming might mean very little to early Haisla inhabitants of the area, the act of naming would carry much greater implications following the introduction of Christianity. Although it is only to be expected that new settlements should be given a name, it should also not be forgotten that many of these locations had names already. Given the implications of ownership and dominance that go along with the act of naming, Alcan’s decision to claim the existing town’s name as its own, even with the shift in spelling from Kitamaat to Kitimat, begins to seem much more insidious. Even though Alcan is a company and not a country interested in colonial enterprise, it does not require a huge stretch of the imagination to link the circumstances of Alcan’s appropriation of the name Kitimat with similar practices common to the imposition of colonial authority over Aboriginal peoples throughout history.

The Christian implications of naming practices resonate through the works of other aboriginal authors as well. In his novel *Green Grass, Running Water*, Thomas King playfully addresses the issue of naming. As part of a cycle of origin stories King provides his own version

of *Genesis* in which the process of naming is handled with slightly less reverence than what is found in the bible:

Ahdamn is busy. He is naming everything

You are a microwave oven, Ahdamn tells the Elk.

Nope, says that Elk. Try again.

You are a garage sale, Ahdamn tells the Bear.

We got to get you some glasses, says the Bear.

You are a telephone book, Ahdamn tells the Cedar Tree.

You're getting closer, says the Cedar Tree. (41)

In this version, Ahdamn is not given specific authority over these creatures but he proceeds to name them anyway, and the names he chooses are all wrong. King's humorous slant on the Garden of Eden narrative provides an interesting commentary on the nature of naming. Even though Ahdamn might call the Elk a microwave oven, the Elk knows that he is mistaken and the misnomer does nothing to alter the inherent characteristics of the Elk. In the same manner, simply attaching European names and teaching Aboriginal peoples about Christianity is not enough to obliterate cultural knowledge that has developed over thousands of years. Yet, despite the continuance of Aboriginal cultural practices, the attempted erasure of Aboriginal traditions in the name of assimilation have led to a dual identity for many Aboriginal people. Although names do not change the physical properties of what is named, many Aboriginal communities and individuals are still identified by colonial labels.

Thomas King's story is fictional, but it bears striking similarities to actual events in Canadian history. In his book *Tsawalk: A Nuu-chah-nulth Worldview*, E. Richard Atleo recalls how the early inhabitants of Vancouver Island came to be known as the Nootka:

According to oral history, the Mowachaht, who have lived in Nootka Sound for millennia, found Captain Cook apparently lost in a fog just outside of Friendly Cove. Since English was not yet a locally required language, they provided him the directions to safe harbour in the Nuu-chah-nulth language. The Nuu-chah-nulth phrase employed for the occasion, *nutkh-she-ee*, which sounds a little like ‘noot-ka’ when shouted from a distance over the sea, means ‘to turn around.’ As the phrase gives no indication of direction, one can imagine that it was accompanied by a chorus of arms waving in large circles to indicate the route. (1)

Atleo states that the Mowachaht have inhabited Nootka Sound for millennia, but the area was not actually known as such until the time of Captain Cook’s visit. Since then “Nootka” has been dropped as the signifier of the people themselves in favour of the more culturally significant “Nuu-chah-nulth”; however, Nootka Sound and Nootka Island have retained their names and remain as a legacy of Cook’s mistake. This was not the only time in Canadian history that miscommunication has led to questionable choices when naming new territories. In fact, Lisamarie indicates that the name Kitamaat was the result of a similar miscommunication:

‘Kitamaat’ is a Tsimshian word that means people of the snow, and that was their name for the main Haisla village. So when the Hudson’s Bay traders asked their guides, ‘Hey, what’s that village called?’ and the Tsimshian guides said, ‘Oh, that’s Kitamaat.’ The name got stuck on the official records and the village has been called Kitamaat ever since, even though it really should be called Haisla. (5)

Although the people living there might have called their home something else entirely, colonial culture favours “official” records and thus Kitamaat owes its namesake to the first person who wrote it down. The sad truth is that explorers and traders are not necessarily concerned with

accuracy, but rather they are mostly interested in applying the most convenient labels in order to suit the dictates of their own cultural paradigm. Thomas King's Ahdamn narrative in *Green Grass, Running Water*, the application of the name Nootka to the Nuu-chah-nulth, and the imposition of using a Tsimshian word as the name for a Haisla community, are all examples of colonial misrepresentations, and in the latter two examples these mistakes greatly contribute to the alienation of specific Aboriginal communities from their homelands.

Fortunately maps can be altered, and sometimes such alterations are undertaken in the interest of increased cultural sensitivity rather than as an imposition of colonial authority. As has been shown, the "Nootka" have been able to reassert some agency over their own identity by reclaiming the name "Nuu-chah-nulth," and similar circumstances have also occurred in the Queen Charlotte Islands which have recently been officially given the traditional name Haida Gwaii. The tendency to apply aboriginal names, both accurate and otherwise, to the places filling up the Canadian map was fairly common in colonial times, yet even more frequent was the imposition of imperial monikers. Such is the case with Haida Gwaii:

The archipelago was first named after one of the ships of British Captain George Dixon in 1778, who called his vessel Queen Charlotte after the wife of King George III. Haida Gwaii was created as an alternative name for the islands to acknowledge the history of the Haida Nation as part of its land claim efforts. ("Queen Charlotte")

The act of changing the name of the Queen Charlotte Islands to Haida Gwaii speaks volumes about the role that naming plays in relation to cultural identity. Although the physical topography of the islands themselves will not be altered by a mere name change, the cultural resonance of such recognition for the people of the Haida Nation is incalculable.

The erasure of traditional names in favour of European ones is a common method used in the attempt to absorb indigenous populations into the fold of colonial society, and the practice did not stop with places but was used in the effort to subjugate individuals as well. However, rather than providing Aboriginal people with names that reflect colonial authority, the renaming of individuals takes the form of “christening,” thereby enacting a form of religious rather than governmental control. In his book *Aboriginal Peoples and Politics*, Paul Tennant describes the relationship between naming and religious conversion:

A practice carried out by most early missionaries, but also by Indian agents, was the assigning of European family names to Indians. Doing so seems to have been regarded as an essential step in the conversion to Christianity. Because missionaries commonly assigned names from their own ethnic groups, English family names became predominant in the Protestant areas, while French names became predominant in the Catholic areas. [...] Missionaries and agents insisted that family names pass in the European manner from man to wife and children, causing confusion with the north coast matrilineal custom. (79)

Forcing European family names upon Aboriginal people not only has the effect of claiming individuals for a particular branch of Christianity, but in some cases it also carries along with it the added burden of disrupting inheritance practices by imposing a patrilineal model upon a previously matrilineal societies.

This does not mean that the application of European authority over the indigenous populations of Canada was a simple act of applying new names to people and places, or that this endeavour was entirely successful. Paul Tennant, for one, indicates that the imposition of Christian names was met with resistance: “Contrary to white expectations, however, traditional

names and naming practices did persist, most explicitly among the coastal lineages, but in the interior as well. The traditional name thus remained an element contributing to the Aboriginal identity of most individual Indians” (79). The persistence of traditional naming practices demonstrates that the disruption of culture is not as simple as writing a name on a baptismal certificate. There is something inherent to the act of naming that transcends efforts of conversion and leads to a form of dual identity rather than an assimilated one.

This dual identity is expressed very strongly in *Monkey Beach* by means of the narrator’s name. “Lisamarie” is far from being a traditional Haisla name, yet the circumstances in which she is provided with that name complicate what otherwise might be viewed as an easy association with purely foreign cultural influences. While it is true that her name is directly derived from the daughter of Elvis Presley, her parents’ choice of this name is meant to honour Lisamarie’s uncle Mick rather than the King of Rock and Roll. In terms of engendering a sense of pride in her heritage, Uncle Mick is one of the most positive influences in Lisamarie’s life. With his history of involvement in the American Indian Movement, Mick is the most readily recognizable representative of active political resistance in the novel, and as Lisamarie grows more and more fond of her uncle she cannot help but be swayed by her uncle’s fervour. Uncle Mick’s influence is most apparent when Lisamarie causes a scene in school when she refuses to read from a book that portrays her ancestors as cannibals. Based on the teachings of her grandmother, Lisamarie insists that “it was just pretend” much like “drinking Christ’s blood at Communion” (69). When her appeal to reason fails, Lisamarie decides to take a page out of her uncle’s book instead: “Since I was going to get into trouble anyway, I started singing ‘Fuck the Oppressors’” (69). Lisamarie’s disruptive behaviour is nicely linked back to Elvis as she relates the history of her relationship with her uncle through the recollection of an anecdote in which

they went searching for a Christmas-tree together: “As we drove, Mick played Elvis and homemade tapes that his friend had sent him, with songs like ‘FBI Lies,’ ‘Fuck the Oppressors’ and, my favourite, ‘I shot Custer.’ Despite my pleading that they were socially conscious, Abba was absolutely forbidden in Mick’s cassette deck” (68). There is an interesting conflation of protest and popular music occurring here. The reference to Abba demonstrates Lisamarie’s awareness of and appreciation of pop culture; however, the Swedish band is separated from Mick’s protest music in a manner that Elvis is not. While the prohibition on Abba is merely a matter of taste, despite the lack of any direct artistic connections Elvis and Native protest music are inextricably linked in Lisamarie’s mind because of the circumstances in which they were introduced to her. Lisamarie’s name is meant to honour her uncle. In fact, the love of Elvis is so much a part of who Mick is that when the King dies, Mick mourns him with the same passion that he would a family member (62). Because of the depth of Mick’s appreciation for Elvis’ music, Lisamarie’s name becomes a symbol of agency rather than assimilation as it pays tribute to her uncle’s individuality instead of being a signifier of colonial cultural supremacy.

In addition to the cultural ambiguities surrounding Lisamarie’s given name, she also has a nickname that is imbedded with multiple meanings: “monster” (67). Lisamarie is first labelled a monster as a result of a confrontation with a local bully named Frank. When Frank pushes Lisamarie to the ground and begins to harass her and her cousin, she responds in anger and the conflict escalates until Lisamarie finishes it by biting Frank in the butt (65). Even though Frank instigates the fight, it is Lisamarie who becomes the villain in the eyes of Frank’s mother:

She came right up to me and said, ‘I think you have something to say to my son.’

I knew I was supposed to say sorry. But if Frank wasn’t going to say it, neither was I. ‘You taste like poo.’

‘You’re a monster,’ she said to me. ‘You are an evil little monster.’ (67).

Lisamarie is unfairly accused of monstrosity despite the fact that she was merely defending herself.

This case of mistaken monstrosity provides an interesting parallel with the story of how the Kitimat Valley originally came to be inhabited. Gordon Robinson includes this story in his book *Tales of Kitimaat*. According to the tale, early visitors who travelled up the Douglas Channel in search of missing hunters encountered what appeared to be the mouth of a large monster opening and closing at the head of a river. Believing that their lost friends had been eaten by this monster, the search party fled. News of the monster spread, resulting in the temporary desertion of what would one day become Kitimaat. Eventually, however, a young man named Waa-mis found his way there and upon seeing the “monster” that had kept many other hunters away, he decided to investigate further and he “saw that what had been believed to be a mouth was, in reality, a flock of countless millions of seagulls feeding on small fish in the river” (*Tales of Kitimaat* 22). While rumours of “the monster of Kitimaat” proved to be false, nevertheless, this story reveals that Kitimaat has been associated with monsters and the unknown from its very founding, and this is a tradition that Eden Robinson continues very successfully in *Monkey Beach*. Not only does she provide a condensed version of this same story in her own text (114), but *Monkey Beach* is also replete with other monsters, ghosts and spirits.

The appearance of monstrosity in these examples is a matter of perspective. The seagulls are only monstrous until the observer gets close enough to differentiate individual birds. In the same way, Lisamarie is only a monster in the eyes of a mother who is concerned for the well-being of her son. In Lisamarie’s case the stigma of being labelled monster is immediately reversed when Mick says “Kiddo, [...] you are my favourite monster in the whole wide world”

(67). The approval of her uncle means much more than the opinion of Frank's mother, and when the name comes from him it becomes a term of endearment rather than condemnation. This shift mirrors a similar case of monstrosity in *Monkey Beach*. When Lisamarie first encounters a Sasquatch she is repulsed (16) but eventually the creature's presence becomes a source of comfort (316). These shifting perspectives provide interesting commentary on the misunderstandings that result from relying on superficial appearances. Similar misrecognitions occurred when colonizers first took stock of Aboriginal society in Canada. Many Aboriginal traditions and cultural practices, such as the potlatch, were viewed as barbaric simply because they did not conform to a colonial point of view. Rather than attempting to understand and appreciate the complexity and richness of these forms of cultural expression, colonial authorities banned their practice. The result is a diminution of cultural diversity that is detrimental to both sides of the conflict. The fact that something appears monstrous from a certain perspective does not necessarily mean that it does not warrant a closer look.

Gordon Robinson's origin story does more than simply support the association of Kitimaat with monsters. The small fish that attracted such a large concentration of seagulls are in fact a species known as eulachon, the uses of which Lisamarie describes in detail in *Monkey Beach*. These fish would become an important element of the prosperity the Haisla enjoyed as the first official inhabitants of the area. In *Three Towns: A History of Kitimat*, Janice Beck refers to the eulachon as "a necessary and important resource. Flavoursome when freshly cooked, its excess oil, once extracted and stored, could be used for many months after. The oil was valued by the natives as both a trade item and an important source for vitamins and protein" (6). In an interesting twist of fate, the seagull monster that once caused the fearful to avoid the area is ultimately revealed to be a marker of one of the area's most valuable natural resources. While the

“official” history of Kitimat provides a brief account of the importance of these little fish to the Haisla people, a much more in-depth discussion of the eulachon or oolichan takes place in *Monkey Beach*, and this discussion not only reveals the depth of tradition that exists within the Haisla community, but it also demonstrates how these traditions are being transformed by the influx of colonial culture and the environmental impact of industrialization.

The story of the oolichan, as presented by Eden Robinson, is one of extreme localization. When the topic of the fish is first brought up in the novel, Lisamarie describes their flavour as having a rather esoteric appeal: “oolichan grease is a delicacy that you have to grow up eating to love” (85). The already obscure quality of these fish is compounded further by what she has to say about their relative rarity. According to the narrator, “oolichans spawn in only a small number of rivers in B.C., so the Haisla used to trade them with other villages for things that were rare in our area, like soapberries” (92). The reality of the grease being an acquired taste, coupled with the scarcity of their spawning grounds, provides strong indications that oolichan grease is a very rare delicacy indeed. Additionally, Lisamarie’s discussion of oolichan grease illuminates the complex economy that existed on the west coast before the introduction of capitalism. Lisamarie’s detailed instructions indicate that the extraction of grease from these fish is an arduous and exacting process that requires a great deal of expertise to be accomplished effectively (85-87). Yet, despite the difficulties involved, the popularity of the grease among various communities along the west coast and the rarity of oolichan spawning grounds combine to make the production of oolichan grease a profitable enterprise for the pre-contact Haisla nation. However, the novel provides evidence that this is a tradition that is in danger of fading into history.

The first threat to oolichan grease production that is identified in *Monkey Beach* arises from the necessity of transmitting the requisite knowledge from one generation to another. The tenuous nature of this knowledge is hinted at the very first time Lisamarie raises the topic of oolichans in the novel: “Aunt Edith and Uncle Geordie went out to the Kemano to catch oolichans and make grease. Mom couldn’t make it this year and I didn’t have the heart to do it. I know Mom was disappointed. She wanted someone in our family to learn to make grease” (85). The fact that this threat is only mentioned obliquely and in passing does not make it any less real. The imminence of loss evoked by her mother’s disappointment is lessened to a certain degree when Lisamarie goes on to explain the rendering process in detail; however, there is strong indication that simply knowing *how* the rendering is accomplished is not enough. As Lisamarie points out, obtaining grease from the oolichans is a “touchy and complicated” (85) endeavour. The implication here is that becoming adept at rendering oolichan grease requires a great amount of tutelage which presumably would have been a natural part of a traditional Haisla upbringing, yet it seems that this is no longer the case. The contemporary reality of global trade practices creates a situation where the production of oolichan grease is no longer a crucial element of Haisla economic prosperity. When the staples of life can be easily obtained from Safeway it is no longer necessary to produce unique commodities that can be traded with neighbouring communities in exchange for goods that cannot otherwise be obtained locally. Learning to produce oolichan grease then becomes purely an aspect of cultural inheritance rather than an economic necessity.

Given Lisamarie’s demonstrated academic knowledge of the processes involved in the extraction of grease from the oolichan, her ambivalence toward the practical application of this knowledge raises some interesting issues concerning the changing cultural landscape. When the

availability of foreign resources allows local economic practices to become a matter of choice rather than necessity, the importance of continuing these practices loses a great deal of its immediacy. Lisamarie's ambivalence toward learning the art of oolichan grease production could be a reflection of the mixed signals that she receives from her parents. Although Lisamarie expresses an awareness of her mother's disappointment in her failure to learn to make grease, when she approaches her mother in regards to her repeated spiritual visitations her mother dismisses the encounters as mere dreams (21). While knowing how to make oolichan grease is more practical than an understanding of the spirit world, both are important aspects of Haisla culture. When Lisamarie's mother completely disregards one aspect of Lisamarie's traditional education it creates a precedent whereby it becomes easier for Lisamarie to let go of other aspects of her heritage.

In addition to the issues of cultural transmission, there are environmental obstacles to the longevity of oolichan grease production in Kitimaat. As has already been mentioned, the spawning grounds for oolichans are few, and the novel suggests that pollution has limited these locations even further. In reference to the spawning grounds, Lisamarie provides the following explanation:

The Kitimat River used to be the best one, but it has been polluted by all the industry in town, so you'd have to be pretty dense or desperate to eat anything from that river. Mom said the runs used to be so thick, you could walk across the river and not touch water.

You didn't even need a net; you could just scoop them up with your hat. (92)

While this claim about walking on water is an obvious exaggeration, the depletion of oolichan stocks and the inedibility of remaining fish because of pollution is an undeniable image of environmental tragedy and cultural degradation. The industrial pollution that Lisamarie discusses

can be linked chiefly to the advent of Alcan Aluminum's interests in Kitimat which began in the early 1950s. In a little over fifty years the impact of industrialization has been so severe that it threatens to interrupt Haisla traditions that can be traced back to the earliest settlement of the Kitimat Valley. This transformation of the natural environment in the name of industrial profitability stands as one of the clearest examples of the ways that colonial influences are altering the Haisla way of life and alienating the Haisla people from the land they call home.

The environmental issues Eden Robinson raises in *Monkey Beach* engage a much larger debate concerning the relationship between colonization and the natural world. European global expansion has had far-reaching environmental consequences. Alfred W. Crosby delineates these consequences in his essay "Ecological Imperialism". Rather than making use of the flora and fauna that were native to the "new world", European colonists widely preferred to cultivate agricultural products that were more familiar to them. In areas where competition is not strong enough, dominant strains of European plant and animal life eventually replace indigenous flora and fauna, leading to circumstances where "the regions that today export more foodstuffs of European provenance – grains and meats – than any other lands on earth had no wheat, barley, rye, cattle, pigs, sheep, or goats whatsoever five hundred years ago" (Crosby 496). This sort of ecological replacement is eventually so invasive that the biological landscape of the colonies is totally altered and they become what Crosby terms "Neo-Europes" (494). In this way, the land is not only compartmentalized by the arbitrary lines and names on colonial maps, but the ecological features of the landscape begin to resemble Europe as well. While the introduction of foreign produce and livestock to the colonies made life more comfortable and familiar for the colonists, the practice also had devastating repercussions for the natural plant and animal life as they were pushed into new territories or wiped out altogether. Although this was not done maliciously, the

unfettered replacement of indigenous plants and animals is nevertheless another consequence of colonial impact upon the environment. Val Plumwood addresses the colonial mentality that leads to this form of wholesale ecological transformation when she writes:

An encompassing and underlying rationalist ideology applying both to humans and to non-humans is...brought into play in the specific processes of European colonization. This ideology is applied not only to indigenous peoples but to their land, which was frequently portrayed in colonial justifications as unused, underused or empty – areas of rational deficit. (Plumwood 503)

Adherence to this sort of mentality allows for the unmitigated appropriation of Aboriginal lands in the name of progress. With this sort of rationalist mindset in play it is not surprising that threats to oolichan populations would not even register as valid concerns in opposition to the benefits offered by industrial development.

*Monkey Beach* once again provides an alternative to the short-sightedness of colonialism in relation to the notion of ecological imperialism. During their foraging trips into the woods, Ma-ma-oo introduces Lisamarie to a variety of plant life. One of the most interesting of these plants is called oxasuli and Ma-ma-oo explains that it is “powerful medicine. Very dangerous. It can kill you, do you understand? You have to respect it” (151). Because of the dangers inherent in the use of oxasuli, the plant would likely not pique the interest of colonists who, as Crosby asserts, prefer more familiar agricultural products. The proper use of a plant like oxasuli requires an intimate knowledge of indigenous flora which can only be gained through generations of trial and error. This is implicit in Ma-ma-oo’s instructions: “Hard to explain. But don’t eat it, hear? You eat it, and you go to sleep and you don’t wake up. Good for arthritis. Joints. Hard to use, though. You have to do it right or your heart stops. Bad, slow painful way to go” (152). The

knowledge that oxasuli is lethal when ingested could only be gained by means of observation, but the poisonous properties of the plant did not prevent Ma-ma-oo's ancestors from discovering the plant's beneficial attributes. Unfortunately, it is often an aspect of the colonial mentality to ignore such wisdom. Rather than putting the effort into understanding the properties and uses of indigenous flora, especially plants that are potentially dangerous, early settlers were much more likely to cultivate crops that are familiar and therefore safe. Knowledge such as that which Ma-ma-oo exhibits is hard earned, and that price is something that colonists are rarely willing to pay when the challenges of adapting to a new environment are already so tremendous.

More recently a new form of ecological colonization has begun to occur in the name of medical research. Although plants such as oxasuli would be unlikely to pique the interest of settlers who are merely trying to survive in an unfamiliar landscape, modern pharmaceutical companies can see a wealth of new products hidden within indigenous knowledge of plant properties. However, the manner in which this knowledge is being appropriated is often quite ruthless. Corinne Cluis writes:

For instance, a curing plant that was a free commodity for the local communities of a tropical country may become a marketed one, now unaffordable for the people who discovered its virtues. Even worst, maybe the patent filed by the pharmaceutical company that developed the drug in its commercial form will prohibit the use or sale of the plant by indigenous groups. (Cluis)

The pursuit of indigenous knowledge in order to secure profits for pharmaceutical companies has become known as "bioprospecting" (Cluis), and this type of wholesale appropriation demonstrates that when Aboriginal people and their cultural heritage are not being arbitrarily dismissed, they are quite often being exploited and cheated. Fortunately, the burgeoning Western

appreciation of indigenous knowledge is not always entirely opportunistic. Bill Ashcroft suggests that in some instances a more indigenous approach to interacting with the environment is being adopted:

Although environmental degradation had occurred (and was occurring) in a number of pre-colonized areas, the *post*-incursion damage to people, animals, and places on a world scale was unprecedented. It is thus not surprising that so many individuals and organizations across formerly colonized countries are now turning their attention to a radical rethinking of relationships between humans, animals and place; a re-thinking which, at least in some cases, is looking for its inspiration to the once despised or ignored aboriginal ways of apprehending human identity in place. (493)

It is interesting that Aboriginal practices which were once deemed a misuse of land and resources are now being recognized as alternatives to the true misuses that have occurred since Europeans appropriated most of that same land. Despite this transformation in attitudes towards indigenous knowledge, it is a sad reality that in many cases, such as the careless decimation and pollution of oolichan populations in the Kitimat River, this form of rethinking may have come too late.

This does not mean that the area surrounding Kitimaat is in imminent danger of being reduced to a barren wasteland by the unimpeded march of industrialization. While researching this thesis I was fortunate enough to be able to visit the Kitimat Valley and I observed that the industrial eyesore is limited to about one third of the harbour's waterfront, leaving much of the natural beauty of the area quite intact. In fact, one of the most appealing aspects of the Alcan town of Kitimat is the way that nature appears to be reasserting itself as moss begins to envelope the buildings, thus absorbing them back into the natural landscape. An abandoned mini-golf

course near the centre of town is almost completely overgrown, seemingly as a testament to an age of commercialism that has come and gone. The deterioration of man-made structures is even more apparent closer to the Alcan facilities. Right across the road from the industrial complex lies the ruins of a Hundson's Bay Company outpost. Little more than the foundations of the outpost remain, and signs are posted warning sightseers not to venture too far into the unstable structure. This crumbling relic of corporate colonization provides a stark glimpse into the future of the Alcan facility itself, as if to say "nothing lasts". The presence of these deteriorating remnants of colonial enterprise is an archaeological palimpsest that attests to the entropy that waits to consume all human endeavours. Colonization is an act of erasure, yet the evidence provided by these ruins suggests that eventually even the marks of colonialism will be erased.

*Monkey Beach* shows that these testaments to impermanence are not limited to colonial modifications to the landscape. According to Lisamarie's narrative, the area around Kitamaat abounds with the remains of Aboriginal settlements. However, unlike the ruined HBC outpost, there are no warnings posted to discourage people from exploring these monuments to Haisla history. It is as though evidence of the decay of colonial influence is something that is meant to be hidden, whereas deteriorating Haisla structures are treated with reverence as tributes to the continually evolving relationship between a people and their environment. Lisamarie discusses one of these sites on her hike with Ma-ma-oo when they are collecting oxasuli:

A long time ago, there had been an old fishing camp here, and before then it had been a winter camp. Some of the houseposts still stood, giant, grey logs leaning heavily into the wild tangle of undergrowth, but now the old camp was being washed away by the river. The people had made nets out of *du'qua*, stinging nettle, and it was growing wild everywhere. (150)

This passage demonstrates how the relationships between human habitation and the natural environment are constantly shifting. This abandoned fishing camp is being erased by the inexorable force of the river, but the legacy of human activity remains in the overabundance of stinging nettle, a concentration that is a by-product of previous inhabitants making nets in this location. As nature reshapes a settlement that is no longer being maintained by the people living there, nature is in turn shaped by what those people have left behind. These ruins lend a great deal of nuance to the liminal landscape that is the setting of *Monkey Beach*.

The Haisla nation exists in a middle-ground that is unsettled by a history of colonial contact the repercussions of which have yet to be fully realized. The evidence of shifting settlements found in the ruins that Lisamarie describes demonstrates that the Haisla homeland was never found in a static location. Even though the community has now settled within the readily demarcated borders of Kitamaat Village, the home of the Haisla continues to be an elusive space. Home is more than a physical location. It exists within a sense of identity that emerges from the narratives and traditions that a community shares. The impact of the colonial presence is changing these relationships for the Haisla people. Fortunately the stories that define the Haisla community are expanding in order to accommodate these changes. *Monkey Beach* is a perfect example of this expansion. Eden Robinson's novel accounts for the results of colonization while simultaneously holding true to a distinctly Haisla worldview, thereby expanding the dimensions of the Haisla diaspora.

## Chapter 2 (Dis)Location: Inter-generational Exile and the Residential School Experience

Before Lisamarie's narration begins in *Monkey Beach*, Eden Robinson offers the following Haisla Proverb: "It is possible to retaliate against an enemy, / But impossible to retaliate against storms" (n. pag.). The most violent storm that rages throughout the pages of this novel is the one created by the legacy of residential schooling. *Monkey Beach* depicts an inter-generational cycle of violence and abuse that can be linked back to experiences in residential school. However, these connections are never made explicit but must be pieced together like a puzzle. The legacy of residential schooling in *Monkey Beach* is marked by a general silence and repression concerning the horrors that were perpetrated in these schools. The violence and tragedy that erupt at the conclusion of this novel are the inevitable consequence of this repression. In this novel, the victims of residential school abuse might return to Kitamaat, but the internalization of their experiences casts a pall over any real sense that they have returned home. The memory of abuse haunts every aspect of their lives following their release from residential school thereby alienating them from their own community and turning "home" into an "unhomely" place. The dislocation resulting from victimization is one of the main contributing factors in the creation of the Haisla diaspora.

There are three main characters who attended residential school prior to the beginning of *Monkey Beach*. Although Mick, Trudy and Josh each respond quite differently to the trauma inflicted upon them in these institutions, they all exhibit symptoms of alienation from the community to which they have returned. What began as a physical exile with their removal to residential school is replaced by an emotional and psychological exile that is the result of years of abuse and cultural suppression. Josh's response to trauma is particularly damaging. Sexual victimization is not about desire; it is about dominance and control. In Josh's case the sense of

powerlessness resulting from the abuse he suffers as a child is transformed into an uncontrollable need to assert his own dominance over others. This projection creates a cycle of victimization that is never fully resolved within the novel. *Monkey Beach* reveals the legacy of the residential school experience to be a cancer that is metastasizing in the heart of the Haisla community.

The impact of residential schooling is a current that runs throughout *Monkey Beach*, yet direct textual references to what occurred in these schools are extremely limited. When Lisamarie first raises the subject of residential schools in the novel, her ignorance concerning the lived experience of her aunt and uncle illustrates how the presence of this sad history is often marked by absence. Lisamarie notices the strained relationship between her aunt and her grandmother and decides to ask her cousin about the situation:

‘Why doesn’t your mom talk to Ma-ma-oo?’ I asked Tab when we were reading comics in my bedroom.

Tab sighed. ‘Don’t you pay attention?’

‘I pay attention,’ I said, getting indignant.

‘No, you don’t. Ba-ba-oo was an asshole. He beat Gran. Instead of sending him away, she sent Mick and Mom to residential school.’

‘And?’

‘God, you can be so dense,’ she said. (59)

This passage does little to explicate the repercussions of attending residential school beyond revealing Lisamarie’s lack of knowledge. Just as Aunt Trudy refuses to speak with Ma-ma-oo, she also maintains silence concerning her personal experiences in the Alberni residential school. Lisamarie learns about the connection between Aunt Trudy’s silence and her experiences at school not from Trudy herself, but rather through the translated understanding of her cousin

Tabitha, and Tab's opinions are not necessarily based on knowledge of all the circumstances either. It is clear that Tab believes her mother and uncle were sent to residential school as a result of a choice that Ma-ma-oo made between her husband and her children, but is this really the truth? It is likely that Tab receives this version of events from her mother, but Trudy's recollections are clouded by resentment and misunderstanding. The sad truth is that very few Aboriginal parents were given a choice as to whether or not they wanted their children to attend residential school. The silence maintained by both Aunt Trudy and Ma-ma-oo means that any misunderstandings between them are unfortunately also transferred to subsequent generations.

Much later in the narrative, Trudy's experiences in residential school are brought forward once again, this time in connection to Lisamarie's narrow escape from being raped by three white men who are trying to lure her cousin Erica into their car (250-1). When Trudy hears about Lisamarie's encounter she confronts her niece in order to ensure that Lisamarie appreciates how close she came to being raped or even killed:

‘Lisa,’ Aunt Trudy said, ‘you got to be more careful.’

‘About what?’

‘Those guys would have killed you.’

‘It was broad daylight,’ I said. ‘And there were tons of witnesses. They wouldn’t have done anything.’

‘Honey,’ she said, ‘if you were some little white girl, that would be true. But you’re a mouthy Indian, and everyone thinks we’re born sluts. Those guys would have said you were asking for it and got off scot-free.’

‘No, they wouldn’t’

‘Facts of life, girly. There were tons of priests in the residential schools, tons of fucking matrons and helpers that ‘helped’ themselves to little kids just like you. You look at me and tell me how many of them got away scot-free.’

I didn’t understand why she was mad at me. I didn’t understand why I was the one getting blamed for some assholes acting like assholes. (255)

Once again, Lisamarie seems to miss the full implications of what she is being told. She did not attend residential school herself, and therefore does not appreciate how news of her encounter with the men in the car might trigger her aunt’s memories of what she went through as a child. Aunt Trudy’s reaction reveals quite a lot about the psychological impact of abuse. Trudy claims that she “never know[s] when to keep [her mouth] shut” (255), but this is not entirely true. Trudy does generally have trouble holding her tongue, but she maintains silence concerning specific aspects of her own experiences in residential school. Trudy claims that these things happened to “little kids just like” Lisamarie, but she does not mention whether or not she herself was abused. However, her emotional response suggests that she most likely *was* victimized in school. Victimization has created a sense of powerlessness in Trudy. She raises the issue of residential school abuse but she distances herself from it by suggesting that it only happened to other people. In this manner silence becomes a defence mechanism whereby she can speak about residential school without explicitly revealing the nature of her own traumatisation. While Trudy is concerned for her niece’s well-being, this protectiveness is not enough motivation for her to disclose the horrible reality of her own experiences.

The problem with this type of silence is that it interferes with the process of dealing with the fallout of trauma. Robinson illustrates the perils of the unseen in her description of deadheads: “Old logs stick out of the water like great, bleached finger bones. The ones you can

see aren't as dangerous as the ones submerged just below the surface, the deadheads, which can puncture your keel" (112). The experiences of Trudy, Mick and Josh act as figurative deadheads that are lurking just beneath the surface of everything that happens in *Monkey Beach*. Sam McKegney discusses the threat of these figurative deadheads in his book *Magic Weapons*: "Although neither Robinson's narrator, Lisa-Marie [sic], nor her friends have experienced residential schooling themselves, they remain vulnerable to the cyclical extension of violence seemingly initiated through residential school abuse" (12). Deadheads are a metaphor for repression, and like repressed memories, the fact that the deadheads cannot be seen does not reduce the danger that they represent. Indeed, the danger only increases with time, as is ultimately revealed by the violent climax of *Monkey Beach*.

Most specifically, the silence in *Monkey Beach* leaves the young people in this novel vulnerable to Josh. The abuse Josh suffered during his time spent in residential school is only ever revealed by means of an enigmatic photograph, and the abuse he visits upon his niece and nephew is kept in the background of the novel as well. The unhealthy relationship between Josh and his nephew Pooch is hinted at in the following awkward and uncomfortable interaction: "[Josh] put a hand on Pooch's shoulder. Pooch shrugged it off. Josh handed him an envelope. He threw it in Josh's face and tried to push past him. His uncle grabbed his arm and held him while Karaoke picked up the envelope and handed it to Pooch" (288). The contents of Josh's envelope are never revealed but this only increases the significance of the object. What the envelope really represents is a secret. The envelope is a metaphor for the truth about Josh's real relationship with his nephew. It is also quite significant that Karaoke is the one who retrieves the envelope from the floor. Although the actual exchange is between Josh and Pooch, it is Karaoke's secret as well. Karaoke cannot allow the secret to remain in the open and she quickly picks up the

envelope and hands it to her brother. Both of these children are being abused by their uncle and when the envelope passes through each of their hands it becomes implicit that the secret within is shared by all three of them.

There is evidence that this secret is being maintained by others in the community as well. The contrast between Josh's public and private images is demonstrated quite well in connection to Pooch's friend Frank. In a conversation with Lisamarie, Frank mentions Josh in a very positive manner: "Yeah, Josh got me into Native housing. Good old Josh. He always looks out for me" (305). However, after Pooch commits suicide it is suggested that Frank might be much more aware of Josh's social mask than he initially reveals. In the following passage Pooch's friends discuss the circumstances of his death:

'Did he say anything to you guys?' Frank said.

I shook my head. 'Not to me. But we didn't talk much.'

'We all know why he did it,' Karaoke said.

'Shut up,' Frank said. 'Just shut up.'

'Yes, let's not talk about it. Josh didn't—'

'Shut. Up.' (319)

Frank's insistence that Karaoke remain silent could signify a number of things. It could be that Frank simply does not want to believe the worst about "good old Josh," it could be that Frank knows exactly what has occurred between Pooch and Josh, or it could be that Frank is actually afraid that an open discussion might reveal a history between Josh and himself that he would prefer to keep hidden. Whatever the greater implications of this argument might be, when Frank refuses to allow Karaoke to finish what she is saying he demonstrates how quickly the broader community can become complicit in maintaining even the darkest secrets.

As tragic as Pooch's suicide is, Josh's abuse of Karaoke has much greater significance in terms of the novel as a whole. *Monkey Beach* is framed around Lisamarie's search for her lost brother Jimmy, and his disappearance is directly linked to his discovery of Josh's mistreatment of Karaoke. To varying degrees, every recollection that Lisamarie shares is a reflection on the present circumstances in which she is trying to unravel the mystery of what has happened to Jimmy. The motive for Jimmy's departure, the nature of Karaoke's relationship with her uncle, and the truth about the abuse Josh suffered at residential school are all revealed simultaneously when Lisamarie finds a photograph in her brother's jacket pocket: "Josh's head was pasted over a priest's head and Karaoke's was pasted over a little boy's. I turned it over: *Dear Joshua, it read. I remember every day we spent together. How are you? I miss you terribly. Please write. Your friend in Christ, Archibald*" (365). The collage that Karaoke has created is extremely suggestive, but the birth announcement that accompanies the photograph is much more revealing: "On the front, a stork carried a baby across a blue sky with fluffy white clouds. *It's a boy!* Was on the bottom of the card. Inside, in neat, careful handwriting it said, 'Dear, dear Joshua. It was yours so I killed it'" (365). Lisamarie goes on to explain that she "asked Karaoke about it later, and she uncomfortably said it was meant as a joke, Jimmy was never supposed to find it. But she wouldn't look at [Lisamarie]" (365). Karaoke's discomfort belies her claim that the birth announcement was simply a joke. In her essay "Native Canadian Gothic Refigured," Jennifer Andrews asserts that "Karaoke's card to Uncle Josh marks a break in the cycle, expressing a pointed refusal to continue to submit to such abuse, which began with one white male Christian's sexual abuse of a Haisla child" (13); however, this viewpoint does not take into consideration the ancillary consequences of Karaoke's note. This card only "marks a break in the cycle" if Josh is the only one who reads it. There is no evidence that Josh ever receives this card,

but there is all too much evidence that Jimmy does. Karaoke's actions do represent a refusal to remain silent concerning the circumstances of abuse, but the manner in which she chooses to disclose her victimization is quite reckless. Karaoke stages her refusal in the form of a note which creates the possibility for random discovery. It is not fair to blame Karaoke for Jimmy's decision to kill Josh or for Jimmy's subsequent disappearance; she is merely another link in the chain of victimization going back to the Alberni residential school and the crimes of Father Archibald, but she is not entirely free of responsibility either. Karaoke wants to hurt Josh but the accidental discovery of her note hurts Jimmy instead. Shame and secrecy stemming from Father Archibald's actions at the school create a time bomb that ultimately explodes into further tragedy when Jimmy accidentally learns the truth. These horrible events in *Monkey Beach* demonstrate how, even though the residential schools are now closed, the abuse suffered by Josh and other children like him follows them home and thus disrupts the notion that they have truly returned home at all. Furthermore, when Josh becomes an abuser in turn, he robs Karaoke and Pooch of *their* childhoods, thereby alienating them from any true sense of home as well.

In some ways the depth of the silence that infects *Monkey Beach* can be viewed as a continuation of themes that Eden Robinson introduces in her short story "Queen of the North". Although this is an entirely different story and should not necessarily be viewed as internally consistent with the events of the novel, it does provide some interesting insight into the motivations of characters whom Robinson revisits in *Monkey Beach*. "Queen of the North" is narrated by Karaoke herself and from this perspective the short story goes into much greater detail concerning the significance of the photograph and Archibald's inscription. The following conversation occurs after Karaoke finds the picture and asks her mother about it:

‘Who’s this?’ I said to Mom. I’d been rummaging through the drawer, hunting for spare change.

‘What?’

It was the first thing she’d said to me since I’d come back. I’d heard that she’d cried to practically everyone in the village, saying I’d gone to Vancouver to become a hooker.

I held up a picture of a priest with his hand on a little boy’s shoulder. The boy looked happy.

‘Oh, that,’ Mom said. ‘I forgot I had it. He was Uncle Josh’s teacher.’

I turned it over. *Dear Joshua*, it read. *How are you? I miss you terribly. Please write. Your friend in Christ, Archibald.*

‘Looks like he taught him more than just prayers.’

‘What are you talking about? Your Uncle Josh was a bright student. They were fond of each other.’

‘I bet,’ I said, vaguely remembering that famous priest who got eleven years in jail. He’d molested twenty-three boys while they were in residential school.

Uncle Josh was home from fishing for only two more days. As he was opening my bedroom door, I said, ‘Father Archibald?’ (*Traplines* 212)

Karaoke’s biting sarcasm, as she compares her uncle to his own abuser, is a brief exhibition of the defence mechanisms she displays throughout this story and *Monkey Beach*. By maintaining a façade of indifference and cruelty, Karaoke can conceal how deeply traumatized she is by repeated sexual abuse. Unfortunately this technique ultimately backfires when Jimmy discovers the note she has prepared for Josh.

In addition to the biting manner with which Karaoke confronts her abuser, this dialogue also illuminates a broken relationship between mother and daughter. Not only does her mother refuse to acknowledge Karaoke's hints about the implications of sexual abuse represented in the photograph, but her mother is also responsible for damaging Karaoke's reputation by telling people that her daughter has become a prostitute. The revelations offered in "Queen of the North" continue at the breakfast table the following day:

In the Kitchen the next morning [Josh] wouldn't look at me. I felt light and giddy, not believing it could end so easily. Before I ate breakfast I closed my eyes and said grace out loud. I had hardly begun when I heard Uncle Josh's chair scrape the floor as he pushed it back.

I opened my eyes. Mom was staring at me. From her expression I knew that she knew. I thought that she'd say something then, but we ate breakfast in silence. (213)

The awkwardness that ensues at the breakfast table ultimately exposes the unhealthy nature of Karaoke's relationship with her uncle, but it is a revelation that Karaoke's mother continues to resist. At first when they are examining the picture of Josh and Father Archibald, Karaoke's mother touts her brother's successes as a student, thereby circumventing the true significance of the photograph, but when Karaoke's prayer at the breakfast table prompts Josh to leave so abruptly, her mother is provided with evidence that she can no longer completely ignore. Even though Karaoke is convinced that her mother now knows the truth, the silence surrounding the abuse remains unbroken. Sam McKegey writes about the insidious nature of silence: "Silence becomes a shadow [...] supplying the dark cover under which unspeakable acts occur, while residential schooling remains a hidden weapon, a deadhead lying beneath the water's surface" (12). The breakdown of communication between Karaoke and her mother when faced with the

reality of abuse, provides a mere glimpse of the impediments that exist between the experience of abuse and the victim's hope for recovery. In this instance it is shown that silence not only contributes to the continuation of abuse, but it also ensures that the victim's pain remains internalized.

The silence maintained in *Monkey Beach* and "Queen of the North" constitutes an extremely sophisticated commentary on the self-perpetuating nature of abuse. In bits and pieces the causal chain of victimization leading from Father Archibald through Josh to Karaoke and then ultimately to Jimmy is slowly uncovered for the reader by means of Lisamarie's narration, but there is no sense that Lisamarie's discoveries are ever communicated to the greater community. Pooch removes himself from the cycle and Jimmy removes Josh, but the novel provides no such escape for Karaoke. To the contrary, Jimmy's disappearance will likely only exacerbate the damage to Karaoke's already damaged psyche. Although Lisamarie learns the truth, the horrible reality of Karaoke's circumstances is never discussed openly which means that the trauma suffered by Karaoke remains as another deadhead waiting to scuttle any of her future relationships.

To a great extent, the silence that resonates throughout *Monkey Beach* is characteristic of the gothic tones that many critics have identified in the novel. Citing Maggie Kilgour, Jennifer Andrews writes that "in psychoanalytic terms, Gothic novels epitomize the return of the repressed, 'in which subconscious psychic energy bursts out from the restraints of the conscious ego' (Kilgour 3)" (Andrews 3). In connection with residential school abuse, silence and repression go hand in hand, and in *Monkey Beach*, "the return of the repressed" takes many forms. The birth announcement that Karaoke creates for Josh is one example of this, but there is a much more sinister example that emerges in relation to Lisamarie's ability to interact with the

spirit-world. Silence hangs over Lisamarie's gift as well. When Lisamarie asks Ma-ma-oo about the significance of her visions, Ma-ma-oo is surprised that she has not already had this conversation with her mother. Ma-ma-oo says,

‘Ah, you have the gift, then. Just like your mother. Didn't she tell you about it?’

‘What gift?’

‘Your mother's side of the family has it strong. Do you know the future sometimes? Do you get hunches?’

‘Predictions? From the little man. He comes, then something bad happens.’

She eased herself down onto a stump, then patted the space beside her. ‘Here, sit.’

She frowned. ‘Your mother never said anything?’ (153)

Like residential school abuse, the spirit world is something that just is not talked about in *Monkey Beach* except on rare occasions and among the right people. Ma-ma-oo is surprised by her daughter-in-law's silence because Gladys once shared Lisamarie's gift, but just like the realities of residential schooling, the supernatural is something that has become repressed in the Haisla community. Also like residential school abuse, the silence surrounding Lisamarie's gift makes her vulnerable. All of this culminates on the shores of Monkey Beach at the climax of the novel. Several times in the novel Lisamarie is beckoned by voices that ask her to “bring us meat” (262) in exchange for favours. Lisamarie is able to resist this supplication only until her brother's fate becomes the bargaining chip. The repression of both residential school abuse and the spirit world become combined within the mystery of Jimmy's disappearance, and in a weakened and desperate moment Lisamarie reaches out to forces that she does not understand: “if the things in the trees can help me, maybe Jimmy can keep his happy ending. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad, just this once. I reach into my bag and dig around until I find my knife. When I pull it out, the

voices hiss into silence” (360). Lisamarie does not have any meat to feed to the voices, but she has blood and she cuts herself to appease them. However, the voices only show Lisamarie what happens to Jimmy up to the point when he kills Josh and abandons the sinking seiner (369-70). The voices are playing on Lisamarie’s vulnerability. They know what she wants but they demand more blood in return. Lisamarie previously encounters these voices after she is drugged and raped by her “friend” Cheese. The voices try to prey on her vulnerability in this instance as well but she resists them. Instead she attempts to repress what has happened to her: “I looked down at my plastic bag. I didn’t want any witnesses. I didn’t want any reminders” (261). In order to destroy any physical reminder of her victimization Lisamarie burns the clothes she had been wearing on the night she was raped, but she cannot destroy her own memories of what happened. Although she does not give in to the voices that offer to hurt Cheese in exchange for meat, their presence in this scene links them with Lisamarie’s repression of the violence that was done to her.

Later, when the truth about her brother’s disappearance becomes the bargaining chip, Lisamarie is no longer able to resist the compulsion of the voices. The voices do not reveal Jimmy’s ultimate fate but they do show him seeking vengeance from the man who has hurt Karaoke. In both the scene following her rape and the scene where Lisamarie entreats the voices to show her what has happened to her brother, this entity becomes linked with violence and revenge. In this manner, the vampiric entity that Lisamarie unleashes at the climax of the novel is shown to embody all of the nastiness that has been repressed throughout the rest of the novel. The avaricious “things in the trees” (360) serve as a metaphorical representation of the uncontrolled release of secrets that have been kept for far too long. Silence and repression cannot

last indefinitely, and when the pressure is allowed to accumulate as long as it does in *Monkey Beach* the ultimate release is violent and bloody.

Eden Robinson's representation of silence and the manner in which it contributes to inter-generational trauma is entirely in keeping with the psychological impact of victimization. Yet, no matter how apt the ambiguities and secrecy contained within *Monkey Beach* are in terms of depicting the ongoing repercussions of residential school abuse, it is still useful to look elsewhere in order to obtain a clearer picture both of what actually went on in these schools as well as the way that silence can finally be broken and communities can begin to heal.<sup>2</sup> In order to contextualize the often obfuscated residential school experiences of characters in *Monkey Beach*, this chapter will now focus on two novels in addition to the works of Eden Robinson. Jane Willis' novel *Geniesh* and Robert Arthur Alexie's *Porcupines and China Dolls* provide unflinching accounts both of the abuses that were perpetrated within residential schools as well as the fallout suffered by those who survived. An analysis of these texts will supply invaluable context for the cycle of inter-generational violence depicted in Robinson's text.

Overcoming silence is the central theme of Robert Arthur Alexie's novel *Porcupines and China Dolls*. Like *Monkey Beach*, Alexie's text features three characters who have returned to their community after attending residential school. As the story unfolds it emerges that the characters James Nathan, Jake Noland and Chief David have all suffered sexual molestation in addition to the other forms of deprivation and abuse that were common in many residential schools. Although these men each have great difficulty coping with what was done to them,

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<sup>2</sup> Although I have approached this topic from a primarily literary perspective, there is a lot of non-literary research being done on residential schools as well. The repercussions of the residential school experience that are depicted in *Monkey Beach* could be illuminated quite effectively by an in-depth analysis in relation to trauma theory. Additionally, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) is mandated not only to recognize the ongoing impact of residential schooling but also to provide a safe environment for former residential school students to share their stories in order to promote awareness and to support the healing process. John Milloy's *A National Crime* and J.R. Miller's *Shingwauk's Vision* are two historical accounts of residential schools that are particularly relevant to this ongoing research.

James's struggle receives most of the focus in the narrative. Throughout the text he battles alcoholism, depression, sexual addiction, nightmares, and frequent thoughts of suicide. However, despite James' centrality in the narrative, it is his friend Jake who first discloses the horrible truth of residential school abuse. Shortly after revealing the truth to his girlfriend Mary, Jake receives some advice from his aunt concerning the importance of seeing the process of disclosure through to the end: "It's not gonna be easy [...] Once you've disclosed you have to follow through. Talk about it to anyone who'll listen 'n understand. It's getting' rid of it through talkin' 'n cryin' that's gonna help you. If you don't get rid of it, it'll kill you like it's done to so many of our People" (105). Although talking alone is not enough to heal the mental and physical scars of abuse, it is a crucial first step. The memory of abuse is a poison that infects everything it touches and only grows stronger over time. Disclosure provides a much needed release of the pressure accumulated over years and years of keeping the pain bottled up, but unlike Lisamarie who experiences a form of this type of release when she is alone and vulnerable, the characters in *Porcupines and China Dolls* have the support of their community to see them through this difficult time.

The notion of relief offered by sharing is developed even further when James reveals his own experiences of abuse in residential school. At first James is not even aware that he is speaking, but once the truth escapes his lips he is surprised by his own reaction: "Somehow he did not feel the shame he thought he'd feel. He felt good. He also felt like telling more, but didn't" (175). The expectation of shame is perhaps the most debilitating aspect of living through sexual abuse. Fear of being seen as weak or somehow culpable in one's own victimization are huge obstacles to overcome on the path to healing. The way that James almost seems to be possessed when he begins to talk about his experiences is a testament to the difficulties inherent

to such disclosures: “No one said anything for a few minutes, and then James heard a voice. ‘Me too.’ He looked up. Everyone was looking at him. He realized it was his voice” (175). James is described as being unaware of his own vocalizations more than once while he is disclosing. The distancing represented by James’s disembodied voice is a powerful expression of the weight of silence hanging over victims of residential school abuse. He almost needs to step outside himself entirely before he is capable of talking about what happened to him.

As deeply personal as these disclosures are, they signify only the first few tentative steps towards healing. The most compelling disclosure that occurs in Alexie’s novel involves most of the community of Aberdeen simultaneously. Chief David decides that, now that the truth is beginning to come out, as a leader of the community it is his duty to make a public disclosure. James and Jake stand with him to tell their own stories and what ensues verges on magical realism: “Two hundred people witnessed James Nathan meet his demons, dreams and nightmares with nothing but grim determination in soul and vengeance in his heart. He waded into battle seeking nothing more than total victory and freedom” (205). Like the “things in the trees” (*Monkey Beach* 360) that can be seen as a physical manifestation of repression, James’ psychological demons are described as physical beings that he must engage in life or death combat. This might still be interpreted as merely a metaphor for James’ internal struggle if not for the fact that other members of the community begin to join the battle as well: “James Nathan started laying demons out left, right and centre. Demon arms, legs and heads were flying everywhere. One head fell into the lap of Old Pierre. He picked it up, poked out its beady little eyes and threw it on the floor” (Alexie 205). These experiences seem real to the witnesses and it is important to note that James and the others are not able to conquer these demons without assistance. The residential school experience touches all of the members of the community, not

just the ones who were abused, and therefore it will take the combined efforts of the entire community to expel the demons completely. It is only during the rationalizations that occur in the aftermath of this disclosure the following morning that the full implications of this shared experience are revealed:

What really happened at the community hall in Aberdeen? Despite all the thunder and gore, it was all very simple: three men had disclosed. They'd talked honestly about a sexual abuse that had occurred thirty years ago. They'd spoken of oral sex and sodomy. They'd spoken of the shame and pain of being alone. They'd thought it had happened to only them. [...] They'd spoken of how they turned to drugs and alcohol to hide the shame and the pain. They'd told of how they became sluts to show they were men. Real men fucked their brains out, and that's what they did. [...] They'd said they hurt people and hurt them big time and apologized. They'd said they hoped their children would never have to go through the same thing. They'd held nothing back that day. It was time for change. (221)

Just as they come to realize that they were not the only ones suffering abuse, the three men also have to accept the effect that their own actions have had on those around them. Disclosure provides the community with a new frame of reference with which they can begin to understand behaviour patterns that create a chain reaching back thirty years or more. This is not to say that disclosure is an instant cure-all for the damaging effects of residential school abuse. James still battles thoughts of suicide for a good portion of the remainder of the novel, but he does survive due in no small part to the process of disclosure and the subsequent support he receives from "the People".

Although the reality of the sexual abuse that took place in residential schools in Canada is horrifying, it was not the only, or even the most prevalent, form of mistreatment that occurred in these institutions. The primary driving force behind the establishment of residential schools was the desire for full-scale assimilation of Aboriginal peoples into the fold of European “civilization”, yet the methods employed toward the realization of this goal were in many cases decidedly *uncivilized*. One of the main objectives in the process of assimilation was the complete abolition of Aboriginal languages and cultural practices. In her novel *Geniesh: An Indian Girlhood*, Jane Willis describes how the use of Aboriginal languages was strictly forbidden in her school. As Reverend Dawson welcomes the students to the school he also makes certain that they understand this policy: “You are here to learn English; so, from now on, you will speak only English in or around the school. You will not speak Cree, and anyone caught speaking it will be severely punished [...] You have been taken out of your homes because it is very difficult to learn under such unfortunate circumstances” (45). Of course, the precise nature of these “unfortunate circumstances” is not discussed in any kind of detail. It is expected that Reverend Dawson’s assessment of the children’s homes will simply be accepted as proof that the school represents an improved living situation. As a society we are moving further and further away from the days when corporal punishment in schools was deemed acceptable; therefore, it becomes increasingly difficult to understand how such threats would be conducive to creating a healthy and effective learning environment. Ironically, in the eyes of Willis’ educators it is the nurturing environment of the children’s family homes that has been the main obstacle in the path of their education thus far.

Even when Reverend Dawson makes concessions in reference to the language and childrearing practices of the children's actual families he is not able to do so without at least a tinge of denigration:

I don't want you to think that there is anything wrong with the Cree language. For your grandparents and parents who have not been fortunate enough to go to school, there is no other choice [...] your families do not know any better, so they must be forgiven for their old ways. However, you must forget your old ways, for then and only then, will you be able to concentrate your whole mind on the process of learning. As you learn, a whole new world will open up for you. (45)

While the reverend claims that there is not "anything wrong with the Cree language", he is simultaneously saying that Cree is only acceptable in the absence of "better" alternatives.

Without being quite so explicit, Reverend Dawson is saying that the children's forbears should not be condemned for their ignorance of the English language because they did not have the benefit of an adequate education, but now that such an education is available to subsequent generations, steps can be taken to ensure that this insufficiency can be corrected. This type of logic allows for the appearance of cultural sensitivity while simultaneously dismissing the inherent value of traditional knowledge and languages.

However, texts such as *Monkey Beach* demonstrate that there is much more at stake here than the loss of a language. The oral nature of the knowledge base supporting most Aboriginal societies creates an interrelationship between language and culture that cannot be readily translated to textual form. Ma-ma-oo addresses this fact in the novel when she says, "to really understand the old stories [...] you had to speak Haisla" (211). Ma-ma-oo's insistence on the importance of language in terms of genuine cultural understanding is supported by Aboriginal

scholars such as E. Richard Atleo and Neal McLeod. In his book *Tsawalk: A Nuu-chah-nulth Worldview*, Atleo explains that what comes across as simplicity in many traditional Nuu-chah-nulth stories when they are told in English is in actuality the result of diminishment caused by translation from a high-context language to a low-context language: “The nature of language in context is another reason that stories could begin without the need to explain the setting or background. The Nuu-chah-nulth language is what is known as a high-context language. Each Nuu-chah-nulth word may be associated with a world, or cultural and historical context, that is commonly understood” (3). Unfortunately, because the English language lacks such specific contextual connections in these Aboriginal communities there are meanings and associations that simply cannot be translated.

In *Monkey Beach*, Lisamarie gets a lesson in the contextual nature of Haisla when she goes blueberry picking with Ma-ma-oo:

‘Look,’ [Ma-ma-oo] said, coming up to a bush. ‘See these ones? *Pipxs ’m.*’

‘That’s what you call blueberries in Haisla?’

‘No, no, just these blueberries. See, they have white stuff on them. *Pipxs ’m* means ‘berries with mould on them.’

‘Mmm, tasty.’

‘They are.’ As if to prove it, she popped a few in her mouth and chewed with her eyes closed. I tried one, and it was so sweet it was almost piercing. I had never noticed that there were different types of blueberry bushes. (159-60)

Here we see that the English language has its own inherent inadequacies. In English *pipxs ’m* are merely blueberries covered in mould and would most likely be dismissed as having gone bad just as Lisamarie is on the verge of doing before Ma-ma-oo teaches her otherwise. In this instance it

becomes apparent that the Haisla language carries along with it a knowledge base that cannot be communicated by means of a mere one-to-one substitution with words in English. Not only does Haisla allow for the differentiation of different types of blueberries, but along with this categorization comes the knowledge that blueberries with mould on them are in fact sweeter than other types; a distinction that is easily lost in translation.

Learning a few Haisla words for different types of blueberries may seem like a fairly minor incident, but as Neal McLeod writes,

Words are like arrows that can be shot at the narratives of the colonial power. Word-arrows have transformative power and can help Indigenous people come home. They help to establish a new discursive space. Every time a story is told, every time one word of an Indigenous language is spoken, we are resisting the destruction of our collective memory. (67)

By depicting the lessons in Haisla terminology that Lisamarie receives from her grandmother, Eden Robinson also allows every reader of the novel to partake in the resistance that McLeod describes. This is not to say that incorporating unfamiliar Indigenous words into a predominantly English text is enough to ensure the survival of an entire language, but it is a relatively disarming method of introducing the uninitiated into the richness of a language that carries so much depth and meaning. Additionally, Ma-ma-oo's tutelage in the intricacies of Haisla provides insight into what is really at stake in the loss of Indigenous languages. Perhaps loss is too forgiving a word. The writers of *The Circle Game* caution us to be more specific when speaking about what has happened to Indigenous languages:

Time and again the Church submissions speak of the "loss" of Indian land, language, identity, etc. [...] This is an odd choice of phrasing, because in fact we "lost" none of

these things; they were stolen. Characterising, say, Aboriginal culture as having been “lost” makes it seem like absent-mindedness or carelessness by the Indians. (37)

It should never be forgotten that Indigenous languages have not been somehow misplaced, but rather that they have been actively suppressed, often under the auspices of replacing them with something “better”.

In *Geniesh*, what Reverend Dawson is really teaching the children when he undervalues the significance of the Cree language is the supposed nature of white superiority. This is a lesson that the children in Jane Willis’ text quickly learn to accept without question:

It never occurred to us that we had never met a white man who could carry on a conversation in Cree, or that we knew Indians who could converse quite well in English.

We also believed that white people [...] were superior beings. We had been brought up to look upon them as gods. (49)

In this manner it becomes impossible for the children to question the moral authority of their “godlike” educators. Therefore, when “it was assumed by the whites that all Indians entered the school infested with lice and all sorts of revolting creatures” (39) or that the children were all “dirty little Indian[s]” (86) who need to be disinfected with harsh industrial soap, it is extremely difficult for such impressionable children to think otherwise. Even in the face of direct contradiction. When it is discovered that the sores developing on the scalp of a little girl named Annie are in fact the result of an allergic reaction to Lifebuoy soap, Miss Moore still insists that “if [she] weren’t so dirty, [she] wouldn’t have this problem” (86). Nearly constant negative reinforcement such as this would leave just about anyone convinced of their own inferiority.

If the abuse suffered by many Aboriginal children who attended residential school were not enough, how much worse would it be to then return home only to find that “home” no longer

exists? Robert Alexie addresses this issue in *Porcupines and China Dolls*: “Today he has returned home and he is a stranger in his own land. He doesn’t have any parents or grandparents and he doesn’t understand his language. For nine years he wished he were out of that hellhole. He finally got his wish. But today, for some strange reason, he wishes he were back” (16). Even though the individual in this passage returns to the physical location of his pre-residential school existence, without the familial and cultural ties that once defined the place for him it is no longer really his home. The literal exile experienced while attending school away from home is replaced by an ideological exile. The individual being described in this passage from *Porcupines and China Dolls* has thereby entered a form a diaspora in which there is no place that he can truly call home. Where once it was the school that was a source of alienation and confusion for him, now it is his own community that seems like a foreign land. Although the schools provide aboriginal children with a basic education, the same children return home stripped of their cultural identity.

The diasporic angst identified by Alexie mirrors the experiences of Mick in *Monkey Beach*. After Mick is released from the forced exile of residential school, he embarks on a self-imposed exile as he pursues the course of activism by participating in protests organized by the American Indian Movement or AIM (145). Mick enters the narrative of *Monkey Beach* at a point in his life when he is ready to put his years of protest behind him, but an emotional outburst reveals that his years in residential school cannot be so easily relegated to the past. Mick’s suffering resurfaces when Aunt Edith begins to say grace before dinner, and although we are not shown the scene that precipitates Mick’s response, Lisamarie does describe the aftermath:

‘How?’ Mick was shouting. ‘They were after numbers! That’s all they wanted!

How many converts they could say they had. How many heathens the—’

‘Mick,’ Mom said, running in from the porch. ‘What’s wrong?’

‘Wrong? What’s right?’

‘He’s gone crazy,’ Uncle Geordie said.

‘Crazy? I’m crazy? You look at your precious church. You look at what they did.

You never went to residential school. You can’t tell me what I fucking went through and what I didn’t’

‘I wasn’t telling you anything!’ Aunt Edith said. ‘I was saying grace!’

‘You don’t get it. You really don’t get it. You’re buying into a religion that thought the best way to make us white was to fucking torture children—’ (109-10)

This passage demonstrates how easily the memory of residential school can infect even the most seemingly innocuous of incidents. Edith is only attempting to say grace but this simple action triggers recollections of the horrors Mick suffered through in residential school. Mick has returned to a world that no longer makes sense. The gulf created by the divergent childhood experiences of these characters is so great that it cannot be bridged by a simple return to Haisla territory. Mick has returned home to find that he can no longer relate to his closest relatives. This heated argument demonstrates how the experience of living through residential schooling contributes to a sense of alienation that cannot be fully dispelled.

What *Monkey Beach* accomplishes extremely effectively is the exhibition of the *potential* for violence that is the continuing legacy of the residential school experience. Most importantly, this novel exposes the risk of allowing this poison to remain hidden behind a wall of silence. The history of residential schools in Canada is a reprehensible example of colonial hubris that will continue to haunt the Canadian national identity for generations to come. Indeed, it is a history that must never be forgotten. If Aboriginal people in Canada can truly be said to be living in

diaspora, then the cultural erasure that residential schooling actively encouraged and facilitated is extremely culpable in the creation of this state. But the impact of residential schooling is neither the beginning nor the end of the destructive consequences stemming from the collision of colonial and Indigenous cultures. The tragic conclusion of *Monkey Beach* exposes the harsh reality of the ongoing cataclysm brought about by the implementation of the residential school system in Canada, but the novel also demonstrates that with care and sensitivity there remains a potential for cultural enrichment on both sides of the colonial divide.

### Chapter 3 Echo-location: Situating the Haisla Spirit World in a “Post”colonial Context

Despite the novel’s often overwhelming examples of how the Haisla have come to be disconnected from their cultural heritage, *Monkey Beach* also demonstrates how Haisla traditions have been adapted in response to the Western influences of “post”colonial Canada. Although Lisamarie is immersed in the realities of modern society, her spiritual gift provides her with a unique form of double-vision that actively impedes the erasure of her heritage. This spiritual double-vision has a cultural counterpart that is reflected in the ways that Lisamarie situates creatures such as the b’gwus or Sasquatch within both Haisla and global contexts. The spiritual entities that riddle *Monkey Beach* provide links to the past, but they are also presented in a manner that signifies the current reality of growing cultural hybridity among the Haisla. While the previous chapters deal primarily with the colonial influences that contribute to the formation of the Haisla diaspora, this chapter will focus on how the presence of this diaspora manifests itself in the ambiguities surrounding Lisamarie’s interactions with the spirit world. Lisamarie inherits her powers from her mother, but Gladys has either forgotten how to use them or has wilfully chosen to ignore her own gift. Without the benefit of a tutor with firsthand knowledge of these abilities Lisamarie’s encounters with the spirit world become a source of confusion rather than empowerment. This confusion is a direct result of the cultural disconnection that emerges from the Haisla diaspora.

The first time Lisamarie raises the topic of contacting the dead in *Monkey Beach*, she simultaneously expresses her frustration at how enigmatic their messages can be: “I used to think that if I could talk to the spirit world, I’d get some answers. Ha bloody ha. I wish the dead would just come out and say what they mean instead of being so passive-aggressive about the whole thing” (17). This introduction to the subject of the spirit world sets a tone of ambivalence that

continues throughout the novel. Even though her ability to commune with the dead provides her with access to a perspective that other characters in the novel are denied, this does not mean that the nature of the spirit world is any less enigmatic for Lisamarie. In fact, her perplexing encounters with spirits and ghosts often leave her with more questions than answers.

Furthermore, Lisamarie is not the only character to comment on the capricious nature of ghosts. After receiving a particularly inscrutable response from a Ouija board, Pooch comments: “That’s the problem with the dead. [...] They have such a fucked-up sense of humour” (232). Not only does this statement reveal how the information offered by spirits frequently seems to be intentionally opaque, but the use of a Ouija board as a means of communication also occludes the cultural significance of Lisamarie’s connection to the spirit world. A Ouija board is a novelty used by children to frighten their friends at slumber parties, but with Lisamarie’s hands on the pointer it becomes a powerful conduit to the land of the dead. When Lisamarie and her friends question a spirit using the board, the words “guess” (230) and “meat” (232) are spelled out in front of them. These words are repeated by voices that Lisamarie later hears emanating from the woods:

‘Lisa!’ a voice said from somewhere inside the forest.

I turned my head. I expected to see a person but there was nothing but trees. The crows launched themselves in a flurry of wings. I became aware of whistles, high and piercing. They were in the trees. Some were musical, like flutes. Others played long, continuous shrieks.

‘Who are you?’ I yelled.

‘Guess.’ (261)

Shortly after this, the voices ask her to “bring [them] meat” (262). Coming from these disembodied voices these words seem much more ominous, but the repetition confirms the authenticity of the messages received from the Ouija board. Lisamarie’s gift is hereditary (154) and as such can be linked to her Haisla heritage; however, the act of using a Ouija board in connection with her gift broadens the cultural context in which these abilities are effectual. The ambivalence that Lisamarie displays regarding the spirit world could be a product of her need to account for mixed cultural perspectives.

It could also be argued that Robinson is intentionally vague when describing traditional Haisla beliefs in order to respect the wishes of community members who might not appreciate such information being written down. In fact, in an interview with Suzanne Methot, Eden Robinson explains that her uncle Gordon was criticized for that very reason following the publication of his book *Tales of Kitamaat*: “He wrote down stories he didn’t want people to forget, but he got some flack for it. He was told, ‘You’re not supposed to write them down.’ All our stories are oral. Other than that book, you’re not going to find any books about the Haisla” (12). It is perhaps for this reason that Robinson also jokingly claims, “I can’t write about certain things [...] or someone will go fatwa on me” (12). While this reference to Muslim fundamentalism is an obvious exaggeration, it does illustrate the depth of feeling attached to traditional stories and forms of storytelling.

However, Robinson’s purported hesitancy does not prevent her from sharing at least one piece of lore that is specific to the Haisla and is not to be found in her uncle’s book. That is the legend of the b’gwus. A search for written accounts of the b’gwus will reveal that textual references are as elusive as the creature itself. Rob Appleford identifies the b’gwus with a number of different figures from West Coast First Nations mythology: “the term b’gwus [...] has

evolved from an older root word pa'gwus or pi'kis, defined by anthropologists in at least four different ways: 'monkey', 'monkey woman,' 'wealth woman,' and 'land otter woman'" (89). Appleford does an admirable job of exploring both the etymology of the term b'gwus and the textual implications of these additional meanings within *Monkey Beach*. Yet, despite his best efforts, the b'gwus continues to be an elusive subject. Appleford's primary source for the connection between the b'gwus and these additional figures from West Coast mythology is Marjorie Halpin's essay "The Tsimshian Mask and Sasquatch," and while she does mention some Tsimshian words that are phonetically similar such as "ba'wis" and "bukwus," any reference to the specific Haisla term "b'gwus" is conspicuously absent. This could be a product of the difficulties inherent to translating Indigenous languages into English. In *Monkey Beach* Lisamarie explains that pronouncing words in the Haisla language is particularly problematic for Anglophones: "Haisla is difficult for English speakers to learn partly because most English sounds are formed using the front of the mouth, while Haisla uses mainly the back" (193). In light of the difficulties faced by English speakers attempting to speak Haisla, it is not hard to see how a great amount of variation might occur when these words are written down. Slight errors in pronunciation could easily be transmitted to textual form which might account for the absence of the specific Haisla spelling of "b'gwus" in Halpin's essay. Appleford is most likely correct when he uses these terms interchangeably, but the fact that Appleford's source contains no direct use of the term "b'gwus" certainly confirms Eden Robinson's assertion that "you're not going to find any books about the Haisla" (Methot 12). Despite the absence of specificity, Robinson does provide support for Appleford's conflation of different roots for b'gwus lore when she explains that, "In much the same way that Spanish is similar to French, Haisla is similar to the languages spoken by the people in Bella Bella and the people in River's Inlet" (*Monkey Beach* 194). While

the Haisla language and culture continue to be relatively obscure subjects, the ubiquitous presence of Sasquatch lore among the various West Coast First Nations communities opens the door for a wealth of interpretive possibilities.

Rob Appleford clearly demonstrates Robinson's familiarity with the various creatures which Marjorie Halpin associates with the b'gwus. Appleford's most compelling evidence concerns "the 'land otter woman,' who leaves her crying child afloat in the ocean in order to lure sinful men to their deaths" (Appleford 95). In an eerily threatening scene in *Monkey Beach* Lisamarie appears to have her own brush with the "land otter woman": "Something in the water was drifting out with the tide [...] I thought it might be a cat, but the closer I got, I knew that it wasn't. For a moment, it looked like a baby in a christening outfit. But when I was a few feet from it, it was just a bucket" (356). As Lisamarie's perception of the object in the water shifts from a cat to a baby then finally settles on a bucket, the story seems to brush up against the myth of the "land otter woman" and then recede into the banality of flotsam adrift on the ebbing tide. Yet Robinson's evocation of the "land otter woman" does not end with Lisamarie's realization that it is merely a bucket floating in the water rather than a baby. Inexplicably Lisamarie becomes entranced by the bucket and, trying to catch it, she slowly moves out further and further into the water until finally "something caught [her] ankle [...] and yanked [her] under" (356-7). With subtle transitions this passage morphs from the morbid, to the mundane, and finally to the sinister. Without ever explicitly mentioning the "land otter woman", Robinson recreates the myth in a manner that mimics her heroine's uncertain navigation of the straits between the spirit world and the commonplace reality of buckets floating in the water. According to Appleford, "by problematizing Haisla traditions, or at least making their thoroughgoing application problematic, Robinson demonstrates both the risks of, and the necessity for, cultural *bricolage*" (95). The

anxieties Robinson displays in the Methot interview concerning the ethics involved in translating traditional stories from oral to written form likely play no small role in the development of “problematic” elements in Robinson’s depiction of Haisla traditions. While there is a striking similarity between the story of the “land otter woman” and the episode with the floating bucket, the connection is never made explicit within *Monkey Beach* itself. In this fashion Robinson is able to enrich her novel with aspects of the “land otter woman” myth, which Appleford identifies as an etymological precursor to the b’gwus, without fully committing herself to the complete transmission of another Haisla narrative to textual form.

Despite the multiplicity of counterparts that are connected to the creature within the traditional beliefs of Indigenous West Coast communities, in *Monkey Beach* the Haisla’s b’gwus is clearly associated with the Sasquatch—a creature that is strongly representative of hybridity. Not only is Sasquatch repeatedly referred to as “not quite human” (*Monkey Beach* 374), but this is also a characterization that is echoed in accounts of similar creatures that emerge from diverse cultural communities all around the world. Even the word “Sasquatch” is a hybrid. It is an anglicized version of a term shared by a number of West Coast First Nations communities. Jeff Meldrum explains that, “in the 1920s, Canadian journalist J.W. Burns coined the term *sasquatch* as a common denominator for the myriad of native names. Sasquatch derives directly from the word ‘*sésquac*.’ The original word, in the Stó:lō dialect of the Halkomelem language, is used by the Coast Salish Indians of the Fraser Valley and parts of Vancouver Island” (50). While “Sasquatch” has become the accepted term denoting the version of this creature that exists in the mythology of a great many Indigenous populations in Canada, the term is in fact an anglicized amalgamation of traditional names. The term is thereby revealed to be both a recurrence of the colonial predilection for appropriation by means of renaming as well as an extremely apt, if not

necessarily intentional, signifier of the hybrid nature of this entity. Even though the term Sasquatch is decidedly Canadian in origin, the Sasquatch is merely one example in a much larger community of mysterious primates that fall under the blanket of a field of research known as cryptozoology. As Lisamarie explains,

B'gwus is famous because of his wide range of homes. In some places, he's called Bigfoot. In other places, he's Yeti, or the Abominable Snowman, or Sasquatch. To most people, he is the equivalent of the Loch Ness Monster, something silly to bring the tourists in. His image is even used to sell beer, and he is portrayed as a laid-back kind of guy, lounging on mountaintops in patio chairs, cracking open a frosty one. (317)

The violence and terror that often accompany sightings of the b'gwus in *Monkey Beach* would seem to actively resist the *Harry and the Hendersons*<sup>3</sup> style domestication to which Lisamarie is referring. Yet the plenitude of cultural counterparts which occur worldwide also enfranchises the b'gwus within a much greater global phenomenon, thereby challenging the notion of difference that the unfamiliar term b'gwus initially inspires.

Although operating outside of the realm of "legitimate" scientific research, the practitioners of cryptozoology take the study very seriously, as is evinced by Loren Coleman and Patrick Huyghe's book *The Field Guide to Bigfoot and Other Mystery Primates*. This field guide contains an extensive catalogue of sightings spanning nearly every continent. The list of the Sasquatch's brethren that is compiled by Coleman and Huyghe is much too long to recreate here; however, the ranks of "mystery primates" include not only the well-known creatures that Lisamarie mentions, but also Beowulf's Grendel (86) and numerous other creatures chronicled in

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<sup>3</sup> *Harry and the Hendersons* is a film from 1987 in which a suburban family hit a Sasquatch with their car and subsequently attempt to transform it into an oversized house pet. The unintentional destruction that occurs as this huge creature situates itself within the Henderson home provides an interesting counterpoint to Lisamarie's rejection of the commercialization of the b'gwus.

a wide variety of circumstances and historical periods. Despite the fact that Grendel and some of his compatriots are figures that originate from fiction, they nevertheless attest to the fact that the possible existence of unknown primates has captured the human imagination for centuries if not millennia.

While many cultures have very specific names for these creatures, it must also be accepted that the belief in an entity that seems to transcend the boundaries between human and animal is a common fascination that cannot be entirely encapsulated within the purview of any individual society or cultural community. Because of this, Sasquatch seems to emerge as a poster child for liminality. Robinson consciously engages this liminality whenever she evokes the b'gwus but most especially near the closing of the novel: "Close, very close, a b'gwus howls—not quite human, not quite wolf, but something in between" (374). This passage comes at a point in the novel where it is unclear whether or not Lisamarie will even survive her ordeal and the inclusion of this boundary-crossing description of the b'gwus' howl merely adds to the ambiguity. Throughout the novel the b'gwus functions on a variety of levels. Lisamarie's first encounter with the creature occurs in a situation that is rife with cross-cultural resonances. The Hill family travels to Monkey Beach in order to satisfy Jimmy's excitement upon discovery of a lucrative offer from a tabloid magazine: "Jimmy pull[ed] out a copy of the *World Weekly Globe*. He showed us page 2, where it said that the *Globe* would pay up to thirty thousand dollars to anyone who got a picture of a sasquatch" (10). Although their father agrees to the trip simply to humour Jimmy and provide an incentive for him to finish his chores, the results of the trip are far more unsettling.

Perhaps because of his desire to capitalize monetarily on the experience or in response to her latent spiritual gifts, the b'gwus is revealed to Lisamarie rather than Jimmy. Unfortunately,

Lisamarie is not only without a camera and therefore unable to acquire the desired photographic evidence, but the atmosphere of the excursion quickly shifts from light-hearted adventure to horror when she does in fact catch a glimpse of the elusive creature:

Suddenly, every hair on my body prickled. The trees were thick, and beneath them everything was hushed. A raven croaked somewhere above. I couldn't hear anyone calling for Jimmy. I could hear myself breathing. I could feel someone watching me. 'Jimmy?'

The sweat on my body was stinging cuts and scratches I hadn't been aware of before, was drying fast, making my skin cold. I turned very slowly. No one was behind me. I turned back and saw him. Just for a moment, just a glimpse of a tall man, covered in brown fur. He gave me a wide, friendly smile, but he had too many teeth and they were all pointed. He backed into the shadows, then stepped behind a cedar tree and vanished.

I couldn't move. Then I heard myself screaming and I stood there, not moving. (16)

This encounter reveals a lot about Lisamarie's relationship with the spirit world. The b'gwus singles her out when he chooses to reveal himself, but despite his "friendly smile" Lisamarie is horrified. This is only one of many instances where it is demonstrated that Lisamarie is ill-equipped to deal with the revelations that her spiritual gift offers. In this particular encounter, her youth and the fact that she is all alone in the wilderness are factors that lead to her uncontrollable rejection of the creature's affable gesture. Lisamarie's horror is compounded by the creature's menacing teeth as well as the presentiment established by her father when he would playfully frighten his children while wearing a b'gwus mask; however, the fact remains that Lisamarie's description of this encounter contains the contradictory imagery of a creature that is at once friendly and menacing.

Robinson's characterization of the b'gwus is complicated even further when Lisamarie encounters the creature once again closer to the end of the novel. This latter sighting of a Sasquatch occurs when Lisamarie is driving back to Kitamaat following a particularly self-destructive episode spent in Vancouver and she almost hits one of the creatures with her car. In this encounter it is the b'gwus that is surprised and Lisamarie's own reaction provides a stark contrast to her earlier screaming retreat from the creature: "As I drove away, I felt deeply comforted knowing that magical things were still living in the world" (316). During her time in Vancouver Lisamarie is once again given reason to doubt the efficacy of her spiritual gift when she is visited by the ghost of her cousin who is later revealed to be still very much alive. The encounter with a b'gwus on the highway then marks a burgeoning acceptance of her gift that is a clear departure from her earlier feelings of ambivalence.

Lisamarie's ambivalence is most notable as concerns her relationship with the little man who repeatedly visits her shortly prior to certain tragic events in her life. Not fully understanding the intentions of this little man, and identifying him as the cause of these tragedies rather than a warning about them, Lisamarie eventually sends him away requesting that he never return. However, she later regrets her rejection of the little man when her grandmother has a stroke and Lisamarie is provided with no forewarning to soften the blow: "Until that moment, I had never appreciated the little man. This is, I thought, what it's like for everybody else. Hello, it's bad news. Bam. I couldn't grasp it: my head wouldn't wrap around it" (283). Lisamarie's encounter with the b'gwus on the highway therefore represents a resurgence of the spiritual side of her awareness that she had begun to turn away from, and it is because of this renewal that she is now comforted rather than horrified by the creature's presence. The dynamics of Lisamarie's perception of the b'gwus is perhaps the most dramatic example of Robinson's refusal to either

completely defuse or condemn the elements of monstrosity that repeatedly appear in her novel.

These contradictory representations of the b'gwus are also reflected in the opposing viewpoints held by Lisamarie's father Albert and Ma-ma-oo concerning traditional Haisla stories. Specifically, Lisamarie relates the example of Albert's story involving two trappers who encounter a group of b'gwus. The men are accosted by the creatures and one of the trappers is beaten to a bloody, lifeless, pulp. Lisamarie also explains that following one of Albert's retellings of this story Ma-ma-oo exclaims, "You're telling it wrong... That's not how it happened" (8). Albert responds dismissively, stating that, "It's just a story" (8). In her stoicism, Ma-ma-oo does not belabour the point but Lisamarie notes "that her lips had pressed together until they were bloodless" (8) and shortly afterwards Ma-ma-oo leaves without saying anything further. Ma-ma-oo is a woman of few words, and as such her reaction is the equivalent of a violent outburst from most people, but because of the muted nature of her response the greater significance of this moment can be easily overlooked. The deeper implications of this argument run to the root of the ongoing degradation of Aboriginal oral culture in the modern world. These stories are real for Ma-ma-oo which she reveals when she says "That's not how it happened" (8). When Albert arbitrarily alters the details of the narrative in order to make the story more exciting, from Ma-ma-oo's perspective he is essentially modifying Haisla history. Albert's failure to respect the integrity of traditional stories is an example of the ways he is allowing his children to become disconnected from their heritage.

Stories and the art of storytelling are an important aspect of the collective cultural identity of many Aboriginal communities. The loss or deterioration of these stories, therefore, represents one of the most significant forms of social impact that have resulted from contact with European

culture. In *Tsawalk A Nuu-chah-nulth Worldview*, E. Richard Atleo discusses the divergent perspectives concerning the importance of stories stemming from both European and Indigenous knowledge bases:

Clement C.J. Webb in *A History of Philosophy* maintains that modern civilization begins with ‘leaving off telling tales’ (Webb 1959, 9). That is, according to this philosopher, modern civilization could not begin until people turned away from their ancient origin ‘tales’ and began to think in scientific terms. In contrast to this view, the theory of Tsawalk not only begins with these ‘tales,’ or origin stories, but also depends on these ‘tales’ both as foundation of knowledge about the state of existence and as a guide for its interpretation. (xi)

The argument between Ma-ma-oo and Albert about the proper way to tell a b’gwus story engages this very same debate. When Albert retells the story improperly, his failure is indicative of a gradual yet insidious process of scientific “civilizing” that, if left unchecked, could eventually lead to the wholesale eradication of traditional Aboriginal storytelling techniques. The sad truth is that “modern” humans are less invested in maintaining a continuous oral history because textual alternatives are so readily available.

Neal McLeod provides insight into the nature and significance of oral history in his book *Cree Narrative Memory*:

Collective memory is the echo of old stories that links grandparents with their grandchildren. In the Cree tradition, collective narrative memory is what puts our singular lives into a larger context. Old voices echo; the ancient poetic memory of our ancestors finds home in our individual lives and allows us to reshape our experience so that we can interpret the world we find ourselves in. (11)

While McLeod admits that stories change as they pass from one teller to the next, these alterations occur in the form of expansions as subsequent storytellers “add to the meaning of these stories through [their] experiences and understanding, and add in small ways to the ancient wisdom” (11). Unfortunately Ma-ma-oo’s stoic response obfuscates the true nature of her objection to Albert’s version of the b’gwus story. In light of the important role that storytelling plays in the transmission of communal history and world perspectives as detailed by Atleo and McLeod, it is quite probable that Ma-ma-oo finds Albert’s additions or alterations to the b’gwus story objectionable, not because the story itself is completely inviolable, but rather because Albert’s contributions are mere sensationalizations and do nothing to enhance the meaning of the story. On the contrary, his interference with the traditional flow of the story may in fact cloud the true significance of what is being told. In the very least, Albert’s insistence that “it’s just a story” reveals that he does not respect the narrative integrity of the tales he is passing on to his children, and Ma-ma-oo’s reaction demonstrates that it is much more than a simple story to her.

The disagreement between Ma-ma-oo and Albert is indicative of a generational gap that is represented several times throughout *Monkey Beach*. This gap not only disrupts the transmission of traditional stories from one generation to the next but is also the cause of Lisamarie’s confusion regarding her ability to commune with ghosts and spirits. While Lisamarie’s parents are eager to instruct her in the more practical aspects of Haisla culture as is illustrated when her mother Gladys expresses her wish that Lisamarie learn the intricacies of oolichan grease production, they do very little to foster their daughter’s spiritual growth. This aspect of Lisamarie’s relationship with her parents is readily apparent when she tells her mother about her first encounter with the “little man” who repeatedly appears to her as an omen of impending tragedy: “I told her about the little man and she gave me a hug and said everyone had

bad dreams and not to be scared of them—they were just dreams and they couldn't hurt me”

(21). Gladys completely glosses over the possibility that Lisamarie has just experienced a genuine spiritual encounter. Gladys' dismissive response provides a stark contrast to Ma-ma-oo's reply when Lisamarie questions her about spirits:

‘What do spirits look like?’

[Ma-ma-oo] paused, looking up into the top of the cedar tree. ‘I don't know.

Never seen one. The chief trees—the biggest, strongest, oldest ones—had a spirit, a little man with red hair. Olden days, they'd lead medicine men to the best trees to make canoes with.’

‘Oh,’ I said, shaking. All the air left my lungs for a moment and it felt like I couldn't catch my next breath. ‘Oh.’

Ma-ma-oo glanced at me curiously, then began walking again. She picked another tree and offered tobacco.

I made my voice very casual. ‘What would it mean if you saw a little man?’

‘Guess you're going to make canoes.’

I laughed. ‘I don't think so.’

‘No one makes them any more,’ she said. ‘Easier to go out and buy a boat.’ (153)

Rather than dismissing Lisamarie's experiences as fantasy, Ma-ma-oo proceeds to instruct her granddaughter in the nature of the spirits. Ma-ma-oo also astutely recognizes the emotional impact that this information has on Lisamarie, but instead of changing the subject or explaining away Lisamarie's experiences as mere dreams, Ma-ma-oo disarms the situation by making a joke that stems directly from the information that she has just provided about the spirits. Nevertheless, Ma-ma-oo resists the easy way out of the situation, and her purpose in doing so is revealed by

the example of building canoes. Just as it would be easier to buy a canoe rather than build one, it would be easier to relegate Lisamarie's experiences to the limbo of mere dreams or flights of the imagination. Instead Ma-ma-oo chooses to instruct and support her granddaughter.

The contrast between Ma-ma-oo's approach to these spiritual questions and that of Gladys is compounded by what Ma-ma-oo reveals next. When it becomes clear that Lisamarie has seen the spirit she is asking about, Ma-ma-oo is not surprised: "Ah, you have the gift, then. Just like your mother. Didn't she tell you about it?" (153). This simple observation exposes an extremely complicated issue to a small fissure of light. If Gladys possesses the same gift as her daughter then she should be the one explaining the significance of these things rather than trying to convince Lisamarie that her visions are mere dreams. Ma-ma-oo casually offers a new perspective on the relationship between Lisamarie and her mother with these seemingly offhand observations. Unlike Lisamarie, who actively seeks to understand the true nature of her gift, Gladys' history with spiritual encounters is revealed to be a story of self-imposed suppression. Ma-ma-oo explains that

[Gladys] doesn't tell you when she sees things. Or she's forgotten how. Or she ignores it. You'll have to ask her. Her grandmother, now she was a real medicine woman. Oh, people were scared of her. If you wanted to talk to your dead, she was the one people went to. She could really dance, and she made beautiful songs—that no one sings any more. (154)

Like so much in *Monkey Beach*, Gladys' experiences with the spirit world are the subject of second hand speculation and therefore do little more than contextualize Lisamarie's state of confusion concerning her own abilities. Ma-ma-oo suggests that Gladys suppresses or ignores her own experiences in order to avoid the fear engendered by exhibitions of otherworldly

knowledge. However, without confirmation from Gladys herself, these revelations remain purely speculative.

Although Gladys herself never confirms Ma-ma-oo's claims, she does consistently demonstrate her own trepidation related to spiritual matters when she repeatedly tries to provide a secular explanation for her daughter's experiences. When Lisamarie begins sleepwalking, Gladys, still seeking a logical answer to her daughter's "problem", takes her to a therapist. Given Lisamarie's "symptoms" of seeing beings that no one else can see and hearing disembodied voices that attempt to influence her or modify her behaviour, schizophrenia is the disorder that seems to be the most likely cause, but the text seems to deny such a diagnosis. Lisamarie's first encounter with the "little man" who seems to predict impending tragedy occurs when she is very young, and while early onset schizophrenia is not unheard of, it is rare. Furthermore, if Lisamarie's encounters are in fact hallucinations rather than authentic spiritual experiences, they appear to be the only symptoms of schizophrenia that she manifests. According to Elizabeth Bromley and John S. Brekke, the accurate diagnosis of schizophrenia must involve the observation of some degree of functional impairment: "while the diagnosis of schizophrenia can reflect a considerable range in symptomatic presentation, it must include a loss of functioning in crucial psychosocial domains such as employment, independent living, and social functioning" (4). The types of impairment Bromley and Brekke discuss involve difficulty in performing simple day-to-day tasks such as preparing a meal or carrying on a conversation. Lisamarie does not appear to exhibit any such examples of functional impairment. In fact, even though she experiences one of her visions during her interview with Ms. Jenkins, seeing something she only describes as a "thing" with "no flesh, just tight, thin skin over bones" (272), this visitation does not prevent her from answering the therapist's questions in a coherent manner. Not only does

Lisamarie respond coherently, but she is also able to disarm the uncomfortable situation by suggesting that her claim to have seen ghosts is really nothing more than a cry for attention. Her even tempered and well reasoned responses to these stressful personal revelations seem to preclude a diagnosis of schizophrenia.

Not only is Ms. Jenkins unable to detect any serious psychological disorders in her young patient, but Lisamarie also appears able to make some psychiatric observations of her own with the help of the fleshless “thing” that she witnesses during the interview: “Its fingers sank into her arms, its legs wrapped around her waist as it clung to her like a baby. When Ms. Jenkins shook my hand, I caught a bit of what it was saying to her. ‘...screws her? Do you think he thinks of you? When he puts his hand on your thigh, does he imagine hers? Is he—’” (273). Rather than betraying the depths of her own uncertainty and confusion surrounding her spiritual encounters, Lisamarie experiences an interesting reversal of roles as her vision provides her with insights into the insecurities of Ms. Jenkins’ own fragile emotional state. Even though Lisamarie never vocalizes what she is seeing, her observations of this parasitic “thing” that seems to be feeding on Ms. Jenkins’ distressed subconscious reveal an aspect of Lisamarie’s gift that appears to transcend and supersede the effective capabilities of psychiatric techniques. While Robinson’s inclusion of a psychiatric interview in this text seems to open the door for a scientific explanation of the spiritual aspects of the narrative, the way that Lisamarie is able to deflect Ms. Jenkins and obtain potentially embarrassing insights into the interviewer’s own mental state denies the possibility of such a simple solution.

Although Lisamarie’s experience with the therapist reveals that her spiritual gifts function outside of the purview of Western medicine, this does not mean that her gift is necessarily infallible. In fact, one incident in the novel demonstrates that her gift, or at the very

least Lisamarie's facility for interpreting the visions she receives, is highly suspect. This incident, which was mentioned briefly earlier in this chapter, occurs during the period Lisamarie spends living in Vancouver. While she is in the midst of a prolonged binge of alcohol, drugs and partying, Lisamarie is visited by what appears to be the ghost of her cousin Tab:

When I caught up with her, I shook out a cigarette and sucked in three hasty puffs. She scowled at me. 'Help yourself,' I said, tossing the pack to her. It went right through her body. Startled, I watched as it hit the ground and bounced.

'You Moron,' she said.

'But you can't be dead. I just saw you last week...' I touched my temple where a hangover headache was intensifying. 'I must be dreaming.'

'Wake up and smell the piss, dearie. I just got bumped off by a couple of boozehound rednecks and I'm pretty fucking angry at you right now.'

'At me?'

'Don't look at me like that. You and your fucking problems. Get your act together and go home.'

She disappeared. It was as if she had never been there. I waited, wondering if I was hallucinating. (301)

During a subsequent conversation with Tab's mother Lisamarie learns that her cousin is very much alive. Whether she is hallucinating or merely suffering from the effects of a particularly severe hangover, this episode exposes the potential unreliability of Lisamarie's visions. This scene adds yet another level of uncertainty to the already ambiguous representations of the spirit world in *Monkey Beach*. In many ways the spirit world is not meant to make sense to the living. According to Ma-ma-oo, "everything in the land of the dead is backwards" (140). The scene with

Tab's "ghost" could be a product of the confusing nature of the land of the dead. Lisamarie has had premonitions before, and it could be that the events Tab describes simply have not yet come to pass. What the revelation of Tab's continued presence in the land of the living, despite this vision of her ghost, demonstrates most explicitly is that Lisamarie's command over her spiritual gift remains uncertain. Lisamarie's ability to commune with spirits is not a font of easily relatable answers to life's questions. The messages Lisamarie receives from spirits and ghosts are uncertain at the best of times, and this bizarre scene reveals how she is often truly out of her depth.

Perhaps the most significant ambiguity related to the transmission of knowledge from the spirit world in *Monkey Beach* concerns the revelation of Jimmy's fate. Lisamarie's search for her brother finally culminates in a desperate plea to a potentially dangerous spirit. As discussed in the previous chapter of this thesis, Lisamarie encounters this same entity after she is raped, but in that instance she is able to resist the temptation to unleash the vengeful tempest this spirit promises. Where her brother is concerned, Lisamarie's resolve falters and she fails to heed her grandmother's warning to "never trust the spirit world too much" because "they think different from the living" (153). Ma-ma-oo goes on to explain that "there's good medicine and bad. Best not to deal with it at all if you don't know what you're doing" (154). Such admonitions are easier for Lisamarie to accept when it is her personal wellbeing at stake, but when her brother's life is held in the balance, thoughts of her own safety fade to insignificance. Thus, when the voices in the trees once again entreat her for a sacrifice, she responds quite differently this time: "I don't have any meat. But I have blood" (361). Unfortunately, the hungry voices are capricious in their reciprocation and only reveal an image of Jimmy swimming for shore after abandoning Josh, and the sinking seiner, to the cruel mercy of the waves (369-370). This information is sublimely

unhelpful. Lisamarie does not want to know that her brother swam away from the wreck of the Queen of the North unless such knowledge eventually sees him safely to the shore. The voices demand more blood in exchange for further revelations, but Lisamarie is unwilling to trust them any longer. This encounter could quite possibly be the ultimate test of Lisamarie's command of her spiritual gift, and it is a test that the spotty education she has received in terms of interacting with the spirit world has ill-equipped her to pass with ease. Lisamarie finally begins to fully embrace her gift, but her desperation and fractured knowledge open the door for her to be cruelly misled by this "thing that waits in the shadows" (370). In this exchange, Ma-ma-oo's warnings are transformed into a practical lesson the stakes of which are all too real, and it is quite possible that Lisamarie's full appreciation of what Ma-ma-oo has been telling her has come too late. When it becomes clear that Lisamarie is no longer willing to play their game, the voices abandon her and she is left to an uncertain fate.

In the end, the harshest ambiguity in a novel full of uncertainties concerns the fate of the narrator herself. The novel closes with Lisamarie stranded on the shores of Monkey Beach surrounded by the ghosts of her dead relatives. If the presence of these shades did not lend enough uncertainty, the final lines of the novel do very little to lift the veil of obscurity:

I am no longer cold. I am so light I could just drift away. Close, very close, a b'gwus howls—not quite human, not quite wolf, but something in between. The howl echoes off the mountains. In the distance, I hear the sound of a speedboat. (374)

Like the b'gwus, Lisamarie is "something in between". Neither definitively alive nor dead at the end of the novel, she is left suspended between the spirit world and the land of the living. The absence of cold could signal a return to life or a sloughing off of worldly cares. Even the speedboat, which could signify impending rescue, could also be a modern echo of the mythical

boatman coming to ferry Lisamarie off to the underworld. The speedboat is even more ominous when compared to a similar passage that occurs shortly after the discovery of Uncle Mick's body: "In the distance, the sound of a speedboat" (135). The repetition certainly suggests an association between this sound and a departure into death, but is this connection enough to indicate that Lisamarie has forever passed into the land of the dead?

In fact, some critics of the novel are quite optimistic about Lisamarie's final circumstances. Richard Lane writes that Lisamarie "emerges as a powerful First Nations woman, involved in indigenous cultural recovery and a re-inscription of power" (162), and Carol-Ann Howell asserts that "by the end of the novel [she] is ready to take up her powerful inheritance as a shamanistic storyteller" (150). Both critics place Lisamarie in a wholly optimistic position of power at the close of the narrative, but the circumstances that leave her stranded on a beach with only the uncertain echoes of a speedboat's passage providing any hope of salvation, belie such easy categorizations. On the contrary, rather than promoting her protagonist as a self-actualized cultural icon ready to take on the mantle of spiritual leadership, Robinson leaves Lisamarie in circumstances of profound peril. Lisamarie set out on her journey providing only vague indications of her travel plans. She is travelling alone by speedboat ostensibly to rendezvous with her parents who are in Namu awaiting news of the ongoing search for Jimmy. No one knows that she plans to travel there by boat, and therefore it is even less likely that anyone might suspect she has become stranded on Monkey Beach. The only indication that she might be rescued is the sound of a speedboat the implications of which are ambiguous at best. With these unfavourable circumstances mounting, it is impossible to state definitively that Lisamarie's circumstances at the end of the novel symbolize anything but uncertainty. Furthermore, despite Lane's and Howell's insistence that she is a figurehead of "indigenous cultural recovery" and "powerful

inheritance”, it is precisely her search for answers from the spirit world that leads Lisamarie to her ambiguous fate on the shores of Monkey Beach. It is unclear that Lisamarie “emerges” from anything in this novel. Her spiritual awakening is denied the profound significance that these critics suggest, and this is only to be expected in a novel that is filled with similar ambiguities. In a world where Sasquatch is featured in both traditional Haisla narratives and beer commercials, an ending in which Lisamarie becomes a figurehead for the reinvigoration of a purely Haisla worldview would be completely out of place. Instead Lisamarie’s ultimate fate is left uncertain and this is exactly as it should be.

The liminal state in which Eden Robinson leaves her narrator at the conclusion of *Monkey Beach* is an interesting reflection of the dual identity of the author herself. The ethical unease that Eden Robinson expresses in her interview with Suzanne Methot concerning the transmission of traditional stories from oral to textual form reveals an artist who is balancing two highly diverse cultural perspectives. Novels such as *Monkey Beach* are fraught with ambivalence precisely because they are novels. The novel is a European form of literature, and as such its employment in the ongoing evolution of Aboriginal storytelling is somewhat problematic. This is not to say that the use of the novel form constitutes a betrayal or abandonment of authenticity, but rather that the notions of tradition and authenticity must be constantly re-examined as artists and storytellers find new ways to practice their craft. Taryn Plett writes that, “Native peoples are not necessarily expected by the dominant majority to produce art, but rather to produce authentic objects of anthropological interest suited for museums” (14). This sentiment is echoed by Lisamarie when she imagines how tourists might interpret an obscene finger gesture:

Once, [...] a blue BMW slowly drove past us, with three little blonde kids pressing their faces against the windows, their eyes round as they stared at us as if we were dangerous animals in a zoo. The adults excitedly pointed at us.

‘You wanna moon them?’ Pooch said.

‘Naw,’ I said. ‘Our asses might end up on a postcard.’

Pooch flipped them the bird instead. The woman in the passenger seat snapped a picture.

‘See?’ I said. ‘You’re gonna be famous now. Your postcard will read, “Indian boy gives ancient Haisla greeting.”’ (218-9)

The joke Lisamarie makes about this “ancient Haisla greeting” is suggestive of a greater anxiety concerning Westerns expectations for Aboriginal people to perform their culture. *Monkey Beach* is a Haisla story, not because it provides contemporary versions of “authentic” Haisla narratives, but because the act of storytelling itself is a continuation of Haisla tradition. Even though Eden Robinson is an Aboriginal storyteller, this does not mean that her work should be limited by standards of colonially-defined authenticity. Indeed, any such standards are nothing more than cultural illusions. In order to avoid slipping into the stasis of museum artefacts, artistic expression must remain free to adapt to an ever changing and expanding cultural map. The doubling that occurs throughout *Monkey Beach* can be seen as an expression of the necessity of remaining respectful of Haisla traditions while adapting those same traditions in order to reconcile their inclusion in a distinctly foreign form of art.

Although *Monkey Beach* is much more than a mere experiment in cultural navigation, the ambivalence that pervades Lisamarie’s journey is indicative of a double vision that results from the overlap between Western and Aboriginal cultural perspectives. This ambivalence is reflected

in the relationship between the distinctly Haisla b'gwus, the creature's broader Canadian counterpart the Sasquatch, and the multitude of similar mystery primates around the globe. The hybridity that is embodied by the b'gwus' similarity to creatures from diverse cultures is symbolic of the cultural hybridity that exists within the Haisla community itself. *Monkey Beach* represents an expansion of Haisla narratives in the wake of diaspora. The spiritual gift that would have once placed Lisamarie in a position of power within the Haisla community is now a source of confusion and frustration because she does not possess the knowledge to use her gift effectively. Once Lisamarie gives in to the voices compelling her, she is left stranded in the liminal space of Monkey Beach. The uncertain conclusion of Lisamarie's journey echoes the diasporic condition of the Haisla community.

### Conclusion: Contacting the Dead

Coral Ann Howells writes that “Monkey Beach is liminal territory: it is the geographical zone between land and sea, hemmed in by forests, and by the end it becomes the space for negotiations between the living and the dead” (155). Although she is referring, quite specifically, to the geographical Monkey Beach that Lisamarie visits several times throughout the text, as this thesis has attempted to show, Howells’ assertions could easily be applied to the novel as a whole. In a way, Lisamarie’s state of being in diaspora is a kind of negotiation between the living and the dead as she tries to reconcile the Haisla community in which she lives with a previous community that continues to exist in stories.

Throughout this thesis I have tried to demonstrate that Lisamarie exhibits a form of “double vision” akin to that which Homi Bhabha theorizes in *The Location of Culture*. Eden Robinson evokes this aspect of Lisamarie’s character explicitly in the following passage: “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” (265). The doubling that Lisamarie experiences in her dream is a manifestation of psychological diaspora. In her dream Lisamarie sees the world as it might have been if colonization had never occurred. In this vision of a “whole” world, Lisamarie imagines a homeland that she has never known. Although this thesis focuses primarily on *Monkey Beach*, the themes of liminality and dislocation could be easily located within the works of several Canadian Aboriginal authors. I have borrowed from authors such as Thomas King and Neal McLeod in order to support my analysis of Eden Robinson’s wonderful text, but there is a wealth of possible directions in which this research could be expanded in connection with the works of Tomson Highway, Beatrice Mosionier, George Clutesi, George Kenny and Gregory Scofield to name but a few.

In addition to psychological impact of the colonial cultural palimpsest, this thesis has also delved deeply into the horrors created by the residential school system in Canada. As I have argued, the history of residential school abuse is primarily represented by silence in *Monkey Beach*. What this novel demonstrates quite tragically is that internalizing suffering inevitably leads to further suffering. Because residential schooling is such an elusive presence in this text I am indebted to the works of Jane Willis and Robert Arthur Alexie for their assistance in contextualizing this difficult topic. Despite devoting an entire chapter of this thesis to it, I fear that I have only scratched the surface of this important issue. There is a growing body of literature related to residential schooling that could enrich a more intensive examination of this topic. I hope that my own research has suggested some directions that these future investigations might take. I have tried to demonstrate how important it is for the horrifying history of residential school abuse to remain in public awareness. *Monkey Beach* is particularly illuminating in this respect because of the ways that Eden Robinson contrasts the often misleading monstrosity of the spirit world with the all too real human monsters that are hiding in plain sight.

In my analysis of *Monkey Beach*, I have tried to show how the monsters that inhabit scary stories are often far less threatening than the monsters that disguise themselves as human beings. Lisamarie's response to her encounters with monsters undergoes a dramatic shift as the novel progresses. The b'gwus in particular is shown to transform from a source of fear to a source of comfort. With the creature's connection to the Sasquatch, the b'gwus provides opportunities for readers of *Monkey Beach* to find comfort in the unfamiliar territory of the Haisla worldview. Even as the colonial influences represented by institutions such as the Alcan facility and residential schools seem poised to drive a wedge between the Haisla community and

“post”colonial society, the Sasquatch provides a bridge to bring them back together. Sasquatch is as much a part of global culture as it is a figure from Haisla mythology, and in the connection to tabloid magazines that is raised when Jimmy tries to obtain a picture of the creature, the Sasquatch is simultaneously connected to Western pop culture as well as Mick’s beloved Elvis. In a similar fashion, the little man whom Lisamarie once found so unsettling is described as sometimes appearing “dressed like a leprechaun” (132). Rather than being a source of monstrosity, these creatures represent a form of cultural reconciliation as they take on traits that are familiar to diverse cultures around the world. They are figures out of stories that are familiar to us all. In the end, the appreciation of stories is one of the greatest commonalities that link us together as a global cultural.

Contacting the dead might be an interesting premise for a story, but the phrase can refer to more than the conversations that Lisamarie has with her deceased relatives at the end of *Monkey Beach*. It can also refer metaphorically to the manner in which the past is kept alive through collective memory. Thomas King writes that “the truth about stories is that that’s all we are” (*Truth 2*). This statement is far less limiting than it might sound at first. Stories are powerful tools for maintaining a sense of cultural identity. Although *Monkey Beach* is a story that is filled with tragedy, as a work of art it represents something far more hopeful. Even though they are speaking from within a state of diaspora, as long as Aboriginal authors continue to write stories like *Monkey Beach*, Aboriginal art shall remain resistant to the threat of being subsumed by Western culture.

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