

On Critical Frameworks for Analyzing Indigenous Literature: The Case of *Monkey Beach*

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Résumé de l'article

Des enseignants et des critiques qui incluent des romans à succès d'écrivains autochtones dans les discussions sur la littérature canadienne contribuent à leur diffusion à une échelle plus large, ce qui ne peut être que bénéfique. Toutefois, la tendance à lire ces romans selon des méthodes dérivées des cadres culturels et littéraires euro-canadiens, bien qu'utile, est étriquée à plusieurs égards. Par contre, des méthodes critiques issues de milieux intellectuels, culturels et universitaires autochtones peuvent enrichir notre lecture de ces oeuvres et nous permettre de découvrir (ou de redécouvrir) une littérature autochtone connexe qui ne jouit pas d'une diffusion aussi vaste. Cet article porte sur les différentes façons de lire le célèbre roman *Monkey Beach* d'Eden Robinson et soutient qu'en prêtant attention à la diversité des méthodes dans la théorie littéraire autochtone, nous pourrions rehausser notre expérience de la lecture. Deux écoles de pensée de premier plan, qui sont plus complémentaires qu'opposées et qui trouvent leur origine dans des études interdisciplinaires amérindiennes plutôt qu'autochtones canadiennes, sont le nationalisme littéraire indigène et le discours du trickster qui est lié aux notions d'hybridité. Ces approches qui sont axées, respectivement, sur le recours national à la création de récits dans la revitalisation culturelle et sur des perspectives urbaines « post-autochtones » offrent des solutions de rechange à la conception dominante occidentale comme des lectures ethnographiques, réalistes magiques ou gothiques.

Michèle Lacombe

On Critical Frameworks for Analyzing Indigenous Literature: The Case of Monkey Beach

Abstract

Teachers and critics who include best-selling novels by Indigenous writers in discussions of Canadian literature are contributing to the wider circulation of those novels, which can only be beneficial. Nevertheless, the tendency to read these novels using methods derived from Euro-Canadian cultural and literary frameworks, while useful, is in many ways limiting. Critical methods emerging from Indigenous intellectual, cultural, and academic contexts can enrich our readings of such work, as well as lead us to the discovery (or recovery) of related Indigenous literature that does not achieve such wide circulation. This essay focuses on a few different ways of reading Eden Robinson's well-known novel Monkey Beach, arguing that paying attention to a diversity of methodologies within Indigenous literary theory can enrich the reading experience. Two prominent schools of thought, here understood as complementary rather than in opposition, and both finding their origins in American Indian rather than Native Canadian interdisciplinary studies, are Indigenous literary nationalism and trickster discourse as it intersects with notions of hybridity. Focussed on Nation-specific uses of creation stories in cultural revitalization, and on urban "post-indian" perspectives respectively, these approaches offer alternatives to prevailing Western approaches such as ethnographic, magic realist, or gothic readings.

Résumé

Des enseignants et des critiques qui incluent des romans à succès d'écrivains autochtones dans les discussions sur la littérature canadienne contribuent à leur diffusion à une échelle plus large, ce qui ne peut être que bénéfique. Toutefois, la tendance à lire ces romans selon des méthodes dérivées des cadres culturels et littéraires euro-canadiens, bien qu'utile, est étriquée à plusieurs égards. Par contre, des méthodes critiques issues de milieux intellectuels, culturels et universitaires autochtones peuvent enrichir notre lecture de ces œuvres et nous permettre de découvrir (ou de redécouvrir) une littérature autochtone connexe qui ne jouit pas d'une diffusion aussi vaste. Cet article porte sur les différentes façons de lire le célèbre roman Monkey Beach d'Eden Robinson et soutient qu'en prêtant

attention à la diversité des méthodes dans la théorie littéraire autochtone, nous pourrions rehausser notre expérience de la lecture. Deux écoles de pensée de premier plan, qui sont plus complémentaires qu'opposées et qui trouvent leur origine dans des études interdisciplinaires amérindiennes plutôt qu'autochtones canadiennes, sont le nationalisme littéraire indigène et le discours du trickster qui est lié aux notions d'hybridité. Ces approches qui sont axées, respectivement, sur le recours national à la création de récits dans la revitalisation culturelle et sur des perspectives urbaines « post-autochtones » offrent des solutions de rechange à la conception dominante occidentale comme des lectures ethnographiques, réalistes magiques ou gothiques.

In considering the work of Indigenous creative writers, it is important to acknowledge some of the links between Native politics and the art of novel-writing. Paying attention to differences in the cultural contexts of First Nations writers also matters, even (perhaps especially) when one is not speaking from personal knowledge. To ask questions about how fiction by First Nations writers engages the legacy of residential schools or articulates patterns of resistance, for example, presupposes awareness—even in texts that deal with these issues at a “macro” level—that these realities play themselves out in specific communities, no matter how abstractly they are depicted in fictional terms. This article briefly comments on work by the Haisla/Heiltsuk writer Eden Robinson, in particular on a few aspects of her novel *Monkey Beach*, which addresses residential schools among other topics. More generally, I consider the question of the critical reception of Native writers such as Robinson in the classroom: which questions do we ask, and what factors govern or limit our choice of literary texts? Recent publications on post-colonial writing are of some assistance here, but so are the less well-known methods outlined in new work by Indigenous literary scholars in Canada and abroad. I argue that the oral tradition and contemporary critical theory are relevant to the work of Indigenous writers and critics, that these complementary traditions address political, literary and ethical concerns, and that the work of Indigenous intellectuals distinguishes itself from the contributions of their Canadian colleagues, with whom they remain in dialogue. As novels such as *Monkey Beach* make amply clear, one significant aspect of much Indigenous writing—even for urban-based writers—has to do with a culturally specific understanding of one's *relationship* to the land, a relationship that the Western usage of terms such as land, place, region, etc. in Canadian Studies does not entirely capture.

1970s Canadian Literary Nationalism and “the Imaginary Indian”

Shortlisted for both the Giller Scotiabank Prize and the Governor-General’s Award in 2000, *Monkey Beach* can be read as articulating the relation of Western to Indigenous ways of thinking, although on the surface it easily could be read as a straightforward social realist portrait of the Haisla community of Kitamaat in British Columbia. To incorporate novels such as *Monkey Beach* into the mainstream canon of Canadian literature seems natural for many; rather than considering Haisla cultural reference points, for instance, my students often compare it to coming-of-age stories made memorable by writers that I affectionately refer to as “the Margarets,” and who occupy an honoured place in the Canadian literary canon. Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing* (1972) and Margaret Laurence’s *The Diviners* (1974, Governor-General’s Award recipient) are both associated with 1970s cultural nationalism. In these books Native people are fleetingly glimpsed just outside one’s field of vision on the edge of the woods in Northern Quebec, or furtively observed on the outskirts of small-town Manitoba. Alternatively, when not at the receiving end of a well-intentioned clinical or romantic gaze, in much Canadian literature the figure of the “Indian” is associated with the colonial desire to “go native,” with the immigrant process of “becoming native to place,” or with the imperial need to produce compliant citizen-subjects. While there are indeed gently parodic reminders of “the Margarets” in Eden Robinson’s novel, I do not see writers such as Atwood and Laurence as her main point of reference. Instead, I ask my students to read Robinson in relation to Native-Canadian and American-Indian texts that represent a wide range of ideological and cultural views within Indigenous literatures. To place the emphasis as I do on Indigenous literary nationalism as one of several frameworks in contemporary literary criticism should not be taken to mean that Eden Robinson is aligning herself with this or any other critical model. Rather, my intention is to balance the preponderance of Western readings of *Monkey Beach* influenced by post-colonial theory and to address the relative dearth of readings influenced by Indigenous literary theory.

The resurgence of Canadian cultural nationalism in the 1970s, challenging what was perceived as the remnants of British colonialism and American cultural imperialism in Canadian society at the time, rarely addressed Canadian silence about Aboriginal lands, languages, and cultures. Even at their most enlightened, “the Margarets” embodied an age of innocence when it came to Canada’s own history of colonization and to questions of racialization. During that same decade, Native writers

responded to the Canadian government's 1969 White Paper, which proposed "Canadianizing" them, with their own politically engaged books, including autobiographies and testimonials such as the Cree/Metis author Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed* (1973) and the Innu author An Antane Kapeshe's *Eukuan nin matshimanitu Innu-iskueu / Je suis une maudite Sauvagesse* (1976), books that articulate Native resistance at the grass roots community level to the heavy hand of the Canadian government. Such books did not receive the attention accorded Atwood and Laurence, although their use of polemic is no less inspired than Atwood's *Survival* (1972). Considered as resistance writing, they articulate aspects of cultural continuity and outline new methods of cultural revitalization. It is a common mistake to assume that there were few if any Native authors publishing before the 1970s. Eden Robinson's novel is indebted to numbers of Indigenous authors, not least to her uncle Gordon Robinson, whose *Tales of Kitamaat* (1956) in turn affectionately pokes fun at the popularity of the Pauline Johnston / Joe Capilano perspective associated with Johnston's own *Tales of Vancouver* (1911).

While he is based in the United States, it is the Ojibway poet and novelist Gerald Vizenor's understanding of "survivance," as outlined in his book of essays *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance* (1991), and not Margaret Atwood's *Survival*, that captures some of these Native writers' perspectives on the Canadian mainstream. For me, Vizenor's iconoclastic, post-structuralist, mixed-blood outlook is not necessarily inconsistent with the rather different approach, informed by new historicist methods and based in tribal or First Nations viewpoints, of books such as the collective publication *American Indian Literary Nationalism* (2006). Atwood's *Survival* gave voice, not without humour, to a number of victim positions in white-settler literature and culture, positions in which the lines of demarcation between the settler as victim and as victor are deliberately blurred (as in her poem "The Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer," for instance); it is the perspective of these founding fathers and mothers that she reclaims and deconstructs in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970). By contrast, and in response to the West's construction of the "Indian" other, Vizenor offers us trickster figures that challenge Eurocentric views from an Indigenous standpoint; his approach is based in a Native-American, specifically Ojibway rather than a post-colonial sense of hybridity:

Survivance is an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories, not a mere reaction, or a survivable name. Native survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, tragedy, and victimry.

Survivance means the right of succession or reversion of an estate, and in that sense, the estate of native survivancy. (Vizenor vii)

According to Hembrecht Breinig, who acknowledges Vizenor's debt to "Derrida's theory of presence," survivance lies "in the word." Breinig reminds us that "in French the term *survivance* means 'relic' or 'leftover,'" and that it can also refer to "cultural survival, as when Kwame Anthony Appiah employs it with reference to the struggle of the Quebecois for cultural survival." For Vizenor, he argues, survivance carries more weight than "a mere ethnic identity;" if we stress its last syllable, it echoes words such as remembrance and endurance (Breinig 40-41).

Much has transpired in the development and circulation of Indigenous literature and criticism since the 1970s, and in debates amongst Native critics since the advent of Vizenor's essays. Numbers of other critics have coined expressions for describing Indigenous intellectual and academic traditions: Craig Womack's talking stick, Daniel Justice's kinship, and Robert Warrior's intellectual sovereignty are only a few of these, like Vizenor's survivance all emerging from an American context for Indigenous literary studies. Their relevance to Native-Canadian literary scholars remains contentious for some, obvious for others. At the same time that many members of the younger generation of Native writers continue to value ancestral knowledge and land-based traditional values, some of these writers also identify with urban perspectives and Western literary theory, although they are not always in agreement about the usefulness of post-colonial theory for making sense of Indigenous literature. *Monkey Beach* is only one of a large number of novels that place First Nations voices front and centre, challenging prevailing images of invisible, marginalized and victimized Indigenous subjects without for all that denying the serious effects of the legacy of colonialism. These writers often speak as members of specific First Nations (whether or not they have status, are band members, or live on the reserve), as human beings more generally, and also as women (even Laurence and Atwood could not help but speak as Canadians and as "universal" writers who also reflect certain class, ethnic, gendered, and regional views). In short, if "the Margarets," although not always in the forefront of radical politics, embodied left-of-centre cultural nationalism in the 1970s, one could argue that in their own way, novelists such as Eden Robinson engage and debate the merits of Indigenous nationalism today. In *Monkey Beach*'s affectionately humorous characterization of the ageing American Indian Warrior Uncle Mick and his rebellious young niece Lisamarie, Eden Robinson suggests the complex location of a new kind and generation

of warriors and wordsmiths, including women warriors and storytellers, in relation to 1970s AIMster political activists on the one hand and the 1980s “post-indian” word-warrior on the other hand.

Native-Canadian Creative Work since 1980: A Few Points of Reference

If *Monkey Beach*'s fictional points of reference are not to be found primarily in Canadian literature, with which authors and texts is it in dialogue? Not all of Robinson's sources are Canadian, or for that matter, female. Her novel can be read alongside Vizenor's own autobiographical novel *Griever, An American Monkey King in China* (1987), for instance, while her portrait of AIMsters and teenagers responds to the Okanagan writer Jeannette Armstrong's political activist Tommy Kelasket in Armstrong's novel *Slash* (1985). As well, Robinson admits to having read classic texts such as *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (1970) by Dee Brown (Robinson 2008). Once considered obscure, many of these writers—representing several generations of intellectuals—are now well known as contributors to a literary/political conversation that has been taking place for some time now in “Indian country”.

The attention paid to Robinson's oeuvre (a short plot summary will follow my general observations) points to how a number of Native authors are beginning to achieve recognition in this country and abroad, much as Margaret Atwood and Margaret Laurence were making their voices heard in the 1970s, although studies of factors influencing critical reception of Native writing currently lag behind literary criticism of their works. Robinson's collection of stories *Traplines* (Vintage Canada) was a *New York Times* notable book of the year in 1998, winning the Winifred Holtby Memorial Prize, while her most recent novel, *Blood Sports* (2006), a dark fantasy about life in downtown Vancouver's Eastside, was published by McClelland and Stewart. *Monkey Beach* remains the most accessible of her books, and is frequently taught in university English courses. Undergraduate surveys of English-Canadian and post-colonial literature like to include at least one novel by an Indigenous writer—Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993), Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen* (1998), and, more recently, Joseph Boyden's *Three Day Road* (2005) are popular choices. The institutionalization of Native writing in relation to “Canlit,” like the success of John Ralston Saul's book *A Fair Country: Telling Truths about Canada* (2008), addressing the forgotten place of Canada's First Nations in our political culture,

does not, for all that, imply that justice for First Nations people has been served, or that Native writers are household names. As the late Chippewa scholar Gail Valaskakis acknowledged in *Indian Country: Essays on Contemporary Native Culture*, “academic writing has long recognized narratives as a window on who we are, what we experience, and how we understand and enact ourselves and others” (3). Invoking Tom King’s *The Truth about Stories* (2003), Valaskakis adds that “we actually construct who we are through a process that involves our individual identification with the cultural images and narratives that dominate our ways of seeing and representing the world” (3). *A Fair Country* suggests that in Canada’s narratives about itself, there is still a denial of the bases on which this country was built.

For Native people, writing fiction means many things. It entails imagining alternate realities as well as addressing the historical trauma that, in different ways, affects both settler societies and the colonized. As Jo-Ann Episkenew (Cree/Metis) reminds us in *Taking Back our Spirits: Indigenous Literature, Public Policy, and Healing*, “contemporary Indigenous literature serves two transformative functions: healing Indigenous people and advancing social justice in settler society” (15). Native literature celebrates Indigenous culture, recognizing a sense of continuity as well as acknowledging the different kinds of change that European colonization of this country has produced. As Emma LaRocque (Cree/Metis) puts it in her essay “Reflections on Continuity through Aboriginal Women’s Writings”:

Since the late 1960s, Aboriginal women have been creating a significant body of writing, which serves in many respects as a vehicle of cultural teaching and reinvention as well as cultural and political resistance to colonialism with its Western-defined impositions, requirements, and biases. But writing is also about the love of words, which at once expresses indigenous roots, social agency, and individual creativity. (155)

In her recent book *When the Other Is Me* (2010), LaRocque reminds us that “resistance may not always be immediately apparent to the unstudied; for examples we can turn to a range of works by authors that include Chief Dan George, Ruby Slipperjack, Tomson Highway, Tom King, Richard Wagamese, Richard Van Camp, or Eden Robinson, among others” (LaRocque 2010).

In this sense, Indigenous writers such as Eden Robinson speak to what many poets and critics refer to as the Native “imagi/nation,” which takes

as its purview all of humanity, at the same time that it articulates itself through a particular experience of place as well as in a Native-accented English, in French, in First Nations languages, and in multilingual texts. This geographically specific and linguistically diverse cultural experience, however hybrid around the edges, is something that Canadian literary criticism about Native writers, often focused on “pan-Indian” approaches, does not always stress. Native literature’s relationship not only to place but also to land (even in the city) is, John Ralston Saul notwithstanding, still difficult for many Canadians to grasp or to acknowledge. Because of this, Native writers make use of what the Cree/Cherokee scholar Craig Womack, in *Red on Red*, calls “code talk”—allowing for free-ranging discussion based on inside knowledge that takes for granted familiarity with treaty rights, land claims, creation stories, experiences of racism, and Native humour. While some of this code talk is Nation-specific, at times it also reflects the shared experiences of different First Nations who come together in the city, including their experiences of working in theatre, publishing, and the visual arts. I cannot claim an insider’s knowledge of such code talk, but I can draw it to the attention of readers interested in different kinds of readings of Native books than those that have been “mainstreamed” in Canadian literary circles.

Cognitive Dissonance, Cognitive Maps, and Embodied Knowledge

One of the recurring subjects of debate in literary criticism about *Monkey Beach* concerns that novel’s use of topographical maps as metaphor for cognitive and social maps. This concern with different perceptions, including Western and Haisla understandings, easily mistaken as the common sense assumption that maps correspond to reality, troubles the relationship of English words to Indigenous concepts. Robinson has stated that she wanted “to paint a picture of a family that I could have grown up with, since I didn’t see it reflected in a lot of literature,” literature in which “the ‘indians’ were either relentlessly poor or superachievers” (Robinson 2008). Her interest in cognitive maps and the question of representation is an important subtext in the novel itself. The lack of correspondence between Western mapmaking and Indigenous experiences of place—and the challenges to “mimesis” that structuralist and post-structuralist theory has raised—are suggested by the very title *Monkey Beach* as it relates to the important locale “Monkey Beach” in the novel and to the “hors-texte” also invoked by that name. The Harvard-based Abenaki literary scholar Lisa Brooks, in *The Common Pot: the Recovery of Native Space in the Northeast*, cites anthropologists such as Keith Basso, as well as her own

family and community-based experiences, in addressing how Indigenous knowledge operates “within particular, tangible spaces,” reminding us that “*where* events occurred” is tremendously significant and directly related to “the nature and consequences of the events themselves.” But for Brooks, as for Basso, the process of “place-making” also entails “a narrative art; it functions as literature as well as history” (2008 xxiii). Like Robinson, Brooks pays particular attention to creation stories in the history of a community as linked to the “place-world” that figures forth in its literature. Citing geographer David Harvey, she reminds us that “the reconstruction of places can reveal hidden memories that hold out the prospects for different futures” (xliv). Brooks’ own work in “the tribal office of the Abenaki Nation at Missisquoi” is vital to her understanding of Indigenous literature, as is her academic training in both Western and Indigenous theory. She reminds us, in her afterword to *American Indian Literary Nationalism* (2006) and her contribution to *Reasoning Together* (2008), that far from being parochial, it is Nation-specific work that makes possible inter-tribal dialogue, and from which comparative Indigenous literary studies best proceeds.

In contrast to critics whose approach to trickster studies risks overlooking the specific cultural roots of West coast figures such as *Weegit* (Raven), *B’gwus* (the sasquatch) and *D’sonoqua* (the ogre-woman) in Robinson’s work, Rob Appleford and Ella Soper-Jones do pay attention to ethnographic studies of such figures. Appleford makes use of research by Marjorie Halpin, who states that “the term ‘b’gwus, common to the Nisga’a, Gitskan, Tsimshian, Kwakw’ala and Haisla languages, has evolved from an older root word pa’gwus or pi’kis, defined ... in at least four different ways: ‘monkey,’ ‘monkey woman,’ ‘wealth woman,’ and ‘land otter woman’” (89), while Soper-Jones discusses the Cannibal and Bear dance societies’ activities and D’sonoqua’s association with some of these. Appleford admits that he does not address questions of gender in his analysis, while Soper-Jones does not really examine her assumptions about orthodox Haisla practices said to contain women’s spiritual growth. I believe that their approaches misconstrue what they perceive as the failure of Indigenous governance systems to protect ecological, linguistic and cultural integrity at the expense of considering how novels like *Monkey Beach* reveal a modern Haisla (Indigenous) understanding of one’s ongoing relation to the ancestral voices, and to ceremony, ritual, and vision. While Robinson does address the complexities of how such ancestral knowledge is positioned in relation to Western knowledge (including anthropological research), I feel she leaves more room for a more integrated view than these critics’ interpretations would suggest, as

we shall see in my discussion of how to read the novel's ending. Even in an ironic reading—and *Monkey Beach* lends itself well to such a reading—there is room for a significant measure of continuity between past and present understandings of creation stories. One aspect of Indigenous literary nationalism that can help us make sense of this continuity has to do with the importance of family in definitions of community and Nation, whether understood in political or artistic terms. Focussing on several generations of writers within one family represents one aspect of this approach explored by the literary nationalists. The Cherokee writer and critic Daniel Heath Justice invokes the notion of kinship to talk about Indigenous literature more generally. One's kin, for Justice, extend to the rest of creation ("all my relations")—rocks, plants, animals, spirit beings, as well as to humans, their blood ties, clan obligations, and intellectual bonds of brotherhood: "Kinship, like Fire, is about life and living; it's not something that *is* in itself so much as something we *do*—actively, thoughtfully, respectfully" (276). For Tol Foster, it is Choffee (rabbit), the Creek trickster figure, who stands in for what he terms "relational regionalism," contextualizing Michel Foucault's understanding of a "historicist and localized, contingent" approach to truth claims (Foster, 266-71, *passim*) that is consistent with Justice's sense of kinship.

Eden Robinson is one of those novelists who identifies both with city life in Victoria and Vancouver, and life "on the rez" in Kitamaat, while insisting that it is the artists rather than the political leaders in her family from whom she inherits her gifts as a writer. Her uncle Gordon Robinson, however, was known as a community leader and not only as a writer, serving as a public school educator and administrator as well as chief councillor of the Kitamaat band in addition to working for Alcan. While her afterword to *Monkey Beach* does not specify how she reads his work, her comments about the cultural significance of oolichan fishing in her story-essay "Go Fish," for instance, could be interpreted as in some ways consistent with his goal of cultural revitalization, while her work with the Haisla archives also could be seen as honouring his understanding of how print and manuscript as well as oral sources help to serve such goals. Her postmodern, edgy stories in *Traplines* characterized by dark humour, are indebted to her uncle's work, despite their differences in style and subject matter. Robinson has said that the 1950s context for his publication would have let him to tone down some of the earthier aspects of the *Weegit* stories that circulated in her family (Robinson 2008). The sense of irony that shapes his modern versions of Raven, like his rendition of creation stories linked to community history, points to the coexistence of several storytelling modes in Haisla culture in his day no less than

in hers. The multiple perspectives of *Monkey Beach*, as a novel about several generations of the Hill family, reflect and comment on this rich inheritance. In both Gordon and Eden Robinson's narrative stance, the legacy of nineteenth and early twentieth-century Christian missionaries and American ethnographers is also hinted at; Eden quietly takes up the challenge of recontextualizing this legacy for her generation, as he did for his, but both are also aware of leaving something behind for future generations to grapple with.

Early on in *Monkey Beach*, in a direct address to the reader, the narrator asks us to locate ourselves as follows:

Find a map of British Columbia. Point to the middle of the coast... 'Kitamaat' is a Tsimshian word that means people of the falling 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' [sic]. 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. There are four or five different spellings of Kitamaat in the historical writings, but the Haisla decided on Kitamaat. To add to the confusion, when Alcan Aluminium 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 ... Near the head of the Douglas, you'll find Kitamaat Village, with its seven hundred Haisla people tucked in between the mountains and the ocean. At the end of the village is our house. (5)

Later in the novel its narrator, Lisamarie Hill, uses place names to provide more specific information about the history of her family, from stories about their traditional fishing grounds to stories about the merging of several groups from the region and about the arrival of Christian missionaries, in a complex layering of the histories of place in Kitamaat village's past. These interwoven threads of place and history are in turn linked to different generations and different individuals' versions of truth, extending from those members of the Hill family who refused and still openly refuse to conform to the newer versions of Kitamaat, to those who insist on maintaining a long-standing silence about what Lisamarie considers darker aspects of the community's history, not to mention about disagreements concerning that history (194). If, like Lisa Brooks, Eden Robinson is interested in the politics of place-making, her veiled commentary is filtered through Lisamarie's particular understanding of the experiences and stories of people in her family. And Lisamarie

is—in the terminology of Western literary criticism—an unreliable first-person narrator who for much of the novel revisits her own childhood perspective. In Haisla or Indigenous terms, being human and therefore fallible, she resembles Weegit; like Nanabush and Coyote, Weegit is known to act out on occasion, to make mistakes, and—perhaps not unlike European mapmakers and missionaries—to play an active role, for better or for worse, in the history of the people. While maps to Weegit territory remain more elusive, his farts do matter, I am told; they become important islands in coastal B.C. (Robinson 2008)

Robinson's novel, like Lisamarie's narrative, opens in 1989 with an incident that takes place more or less one hundred years after the arrival of the missionaries who, to varying degrees, shape some of the novel's topographical and cognitive maps, including the looming presence of the residential school. One morning Lisamarie awakens from a half-sleep to a reminder of the disappearance a few days previously of her younger brother Jimmy, a former Olympic swimming contender, while out fishing on the *Queen of the North* with a family friend (some years before the accidental sinking, on coastal B.C.'s inside passage, of the real-life ferry also carrying that name). "Somewhere in the seas between here and Namu—a six-hour boat ride south of Kitamaat—my brother is lost (5). The "accident" linked to the *Queen of the North's* disappearance in the novel's plot likely is tied to Jimmy's desire for revenge, and his understandable decision to take justice into his own hands, on discovering that "Uncle Josh," a family friend, may have sexually abused his (Jimmy's) fiancée "Karaoke" during her childhood and adolescence. (Like Lisa's more benign Uncle Mick, Josh attended residential school, where—as we discover in a related short story from *Traplines*—he was sexually abused). As the story opens, the family awaits further news as to the possible outcome of the coast guard's search for the boat and its occupants. These events lead Lisamarie to revisit her memories of babysitting Jimmy, of playing with him, and—half enviously and half in terror—of watching him swim like sea mammal in the bay during their childhood, a time of innocent games and rivalries (Jimmy is her only sibling). Now she needs to come to terms with her grief and with the sense of guilt she carries that she was not able to protect him from this accident. In the process, she undergoes her own physical and spiritual journey by water in search of him, a journey that parallels her memory journey into the past. By speedboat, on her own, she travels to a stretch of coastline known locally as Monkey Beach; this is the site of sasquatch sightings where they had also gone cockle fishing with their family as children, where Jimmy had attempted to photograph the elusive sasquatch, and where she later took

him on a more or less successful healing journey when he and “Karaoke” were temporarily estranged.

The Ends and Means of Western Logic: Indigenous Apprehensions

By the novel’s closing pages, with Lisamarie seemingly stranded on Monkey Beach, we are left with a number of unanswered questions. As she lies on the beach, is she able to propitiate her hungry ghosts, and are lives (or a life) saved in exchange for her shamanistic (for lack of a better word) blood offering? Here it should be noted that throughout her life Lisamarie has revealed herself to be in touch with spirits, having inherited her mother’s unacknowledged visionary gift. Her parents and schoolteachers perceive her personal difficulties, including her dreams and visions, as mental health issues that need to be addressed and resolved before she can become a happy, well-adjusted child and, eventually, a “normal” middle-class female family member, which means a quiescent, conforming citizen. The psychologist reinforces this reading, although it could be argued that her family and her community’s difficulty in dealing with the legacy of denial—denial concerning residential school, loss of language, historic injustices, and more than one death in the family—lie at the root of Lisamarie’s distress. In the same way that she needs to understand why belting out “Fuck the Oppressors” in grade school, a song she learned from Uncle Mick, will create as many problems as it solves, as a young woman she also needs to come to terms with the family’s silence around a number of historic grievances, with her own personal grief pertaining to recent deaths, and with her unacknowledged experience of rape, after being fed a poisoned cup, while at a party. That Lisamarie survives the many internal and external assaults on her being is suggested by the fact that she is still around to recount these events some years after the fact, although as previously stated nothing is certain in this novel, and there is some debate amongst critics on this score. Perceptions of possible or probable outcomes reveal as much about the reader’s expectations as they do about Lisamarie and her family, given that the novel is cleverly constructed to allow for a number of interpretations of the ending, and this in both Haisla and Western worldviews. The death of her Uncle Mick while out tending his fishing nets, for instance, mimics stories from the Haisla oral tradition tied to place names, stories in which grieving for a dead or missing family member, often one who has experienced violence or who has been violent, features prominently in that creation story about the founding of a new Haisla village and family. Other events, such as the disappearance of Jimmy, resemble ritual Haisla dances associated with a

young boy's initiation rites, in which he disappears and is assumed dead, only to reappear in a new guise. Eden Robinson has indicated that she likes the rhythm of these traditional ritual dances, which she has attempted to reproduce in some of her fiction, especially in *Monkey Beach* (Robinson 2008).

To varying degrees both Rob Appleford and Ella Soper-Jones view the open-ended nature of Robinson's narrative as characterized by indeterminacy about the relationship of Haisla to Western worldviews. Given that Robinson has stated that Haisla readers prefer closure (and the same could be said of many of my Canadian students), what are we to make of the open-ended narrative structure she offers in the novel's final pages? Appleford turns to Claude Levi-Strauss to argue that "contemporary aboriginal artists are caught between [two] views of culture-as-concept (or culture as certainty) and culture-as-signs (or culture as contingency)" (86). I would argue that Appleford may be caught in a Western binary here; my own sense is that the hungry ghosts that Lisamarie needs to propitiate, like the figure of *B'gwus*, continue to inhabit the shifting sands and fluid boundaries of Haisla territory, and that the risk on *Monkey Beach* is greatest when one ignores this fact. The issue is not whether what Appleford refers to as a hermetic, insider's sense of "authentic Aboriginal subjecthood" (Appleford 2005) is invoked or denounced by Robinson, but rather how texts such as *Monkey Beach* revisit the intersection of Western and Indigenous ontologies, something that lies behind Gordon Robinson's *Tales of Kitamaat* no less than *Monkey Beach*. In this sense, it could be argued that, if anything, Haisla culture cannibalizes Western art and popular culture as much as the opposite, when the two are not held in uneasy tension. (As Lisamarie's grandmother Ma-ma-oo puts it, things are reversed in the land of the dead, where signs on gravestones suggest the word "Fool" rather than the date "1907"). Either way, I agree with Soper-Jones, who states that the novel's "topos of fascinating cannibalism" serve to frame "a canny critique of literary hermeneutics, fabricating an 'authentic' account of Haisla subjectivity and thus urging readers to 'proceed with caution'" (16-17). Soper-Jones goes on to cite Jody Castriciano's argument that in the gothic tradition "learning how to talk with ghosts (as Lisamarie does) is 'a task which not only takes the form of a legacy but also brings with it the responsibility of an heir'" (22).

While I agree with Soper-Jones that Lisamarie bears the responsibility of a weighty inheritance, I would qualify her observation that the novel's ending problematizes the formula of the conventional *bildungsroman* to include the fact that it also problematizes the formula of the gothic.

Nor would I go as far as she does in claiming that the ending questions survival (except perhaps in Atwood's sense of the term) or casts doubt on "unorthodox" mediation between worlds. Indigenous cultures are far from static, and, as the Laguna Pueblo author Leslie Marman Silko suggested in her novel *Ceremony* (1977), tradition can be adapted and evolves to deal with the unforeseen. If Lisamarie's training is not entirely equal to her powerful gifts or to the forces arraigned against her at this stage of her life and of Haisla history, presumably she learns a valuable and not a fatal lesson, knowing, at least for the moment, where to draw the line. Finally, I'm not sure I agree with Jones that the "rhetoric of social and ecological harmony" is always specious (23), whether that rhetoric emerges from the colonizer's romantic gaze (the green Indian) or from fundamentalism in any of its guises. The challenges of living the good life are embedded in *Weegit* tales as cautionary stories about the dangers of greed and the ubiquity of error in all its manifestations. In short, and I think this cannot be overstated, it seems clear that there are different epistemologies and ontologies shaping Indigenous and Western-based forms of literary criticism. Furthermore, while Western theory more frequently has been read and absorbed by Indigenous literary theorists and reappropriated into their own worldviews, fewer Canadian literary critics have considered Indigenous theory in their own commentaries about Native literature.

Magic Realist, Gothic, and Metafictional Modes: Unmasking Godzilla

It is not my intention to disparage the different methods usefully deployed by a number of critics to make sense of *Monkey Beach*, but rather to acknowledge that few—other than nationalists such as Lisa Brooks—debate what might constitute ethical criticism. Balancing the amount of attention paid to Western genres such as magic realism and gothic modes of fiction with a sense of the limits of those frameworks, while paying attention to Indigenous literary theory and the relevance of Nation-specific creation stories, is one way of addressing conflict and loss but also resistance and resurgence in contemporary Native writing. In particular, on the topic of grieving the passing of a relative, the death of Uncle Mick, who may in fact be Lisamarie's father, deeply affects her, as does the loss of several other friends and relatives, all members of the walking wounded. These include, among others, Lisamarie's grandmother Ma-ma-oo, who dies of a broken heart; her cousin Tab, who dies on the streets of Vancouver; and her friend Pooch, who presumably commits suicide. While the reader worries, on more than one occasion,

that Lisamarie might prematurely join the ranks of those who have gone on to the spirit world before what we consider their allotted time—and this despite Jimmy's own watchful presence when he fears she might be at risk—my sense is that she is much more resilient than fragile, and much too astute and engaged, despite her all-too-human fallibility, to be blindsided for very long.

In balancing tragic outcomes with a sense of agency, *Monkey Beach* could be said to contribute to the circulation of more accurate information about life in certain communities, helping to break down stereotypes about both politically active community leaders such as Uncle Mick and “ordinary” family members and friends. These “ordinary” folk include Lisamarie's parents, who are understandably ambitious for their kids, her brother Jimmy, who has reconsidered his ambitions of succeeding according to “white” models and standards, and her childhood sweetheart Frank, whose unrequited love for Lisamarie may be due to his reticence, to her own shyness, to class differences between them, to clan taboos, to her fear of being loved, or simply to her unstated preference not to become pregnant at a relatively young age. Much is hinted at, and much remains unstated, although Ma-ma-oo understands more than she lets on, and more than Lisamarie knows, as also does Lisamarie's mother Gladys. Novels like *Monkey Beach* call into question our stereotypes about the style and form of Native fiction as well as about the character types encountered in such fiction. Indigenous writers who support themselves through their writing inevitably depend on university textbook sales as well as on the broad reading public in Canada and abroad for revenue, and this cannot help but shape how they present themselves and their materials for the general reader; conformity to Western aesthetic modes favours sales, but so do images of angst-ridden teenagers, noble eco-warriors, gentle spiritual elders, and nasty predators. In contrast to stereotypical images, Eden Robinson's representation of flesh-and-blood family members is convincing, her attention to popular culture is refreshing, and her use of humour undercuts essentialist views—including those sometimes held by critics who claim to denounce essentialism.

Robinson's novel, thickly populated as it is with stories of warriors, activists, shamans, spirit beings, monsters, animals, plant beings, artifacts, landscapes, languages, rocks, rivers, architecture, streets, recipes, secrets, and “ordinary” folk, while not as explicit as Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), lends itself to a magic realist reading, an approach that is also frequently invoked in relation to the novels *Kiss of the Fur Queen* and *Green Grass, Running Water*. Magic realism, one of the more popular

forms of fantasy in contemporary post-colonial fiction, is an expression that initially was used to describe Columbian writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez' *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967); it was popularized in Canada by the British Columbian writer Jack Hodgins, in particular by his 1977 novel *The Invention of the World*. Associated with the use of the fabulous in epic family sagas about the founding of dynasties in the colonies, magic realism's use of myth lends itself well to narratives about the creation of new European nations in the "virgin" wilderness, the forcible displacement or attempted assimilation of Indigenous populations, the oppression of both European and Native women by patriarchs and missionaries, and the "moment" of Independence, as in Rushdie's work. Magic realism has also been applied to writing that explores a particular quality of light in the individual's perception of the world, including a sense of miraculous events that defy logic; in this sense it is used to describe the chiaroscuro aspect of early short stories of Alice Munro as well as the presence of the bizarre or the extraneous in Jack Hodgins' own short stories, for instance. Those who argue on behalf of the magic realist roots of contemporary Indigenous writing tend to conflate these two aspects of the genre, often stressing the mythological dimension at the expense of the political, and thus somewhat muting the critique of colonialism and the radical roots of much contemporary Indigenous writing. My sense is that Robinson's narrative strategies are only partly captured by the term, not least because this catch phrase posits the need to set aside the dualism that is a part of the Western legacy but not of Indigenous worldviews. To the extent that the work of Indigenous writers reflects a different sense of history, there is not the same need to reconcile "magic" with "realism," the term ceases to be oxymoronic, and perhaps for this reason it is not much used by Native critics, even when there is an affinity felt with the mood evoked in such magic realist work.

Were I to invoke one word from Western literary theory to describe *Monkey Beach*, I would call it metafictional, in that I read it as a self-reflexive, philosophical narrative about a female storyteller's relationship to stories. The novel slyly hints at the author's possible position vis-à-vis other kinds of narratives and knowledges associated with the "four posts" alluded to in Vizenor's poetics of "post-indianism" in contemporary critical theory—post-colonialism, post-modernism, post-structuralism and feminism. I can think of several reasons for Robinson's use of "code-talk" in this context, besides her commitment to accessibility, her desire to honour her community, an artist's love of ambiguity, and an understanding that a good story, like certain forms of visual art, sometimes (but not always) functions as allegory. Native writers understand that more often

than not, it is also the language that speaks us, and not we who speak the language. Let me comment briefly on post-colonialism and feminism, to mention only two of the four “posts,” before concluding with a few comments about Robinson’s language-based representation of the female post-indian warrior in the latter-day Haisla house of signs.

Indigenous fiction about the history of colonialism, however gently this topic is broached, often generates unease in the reader, a discomfort that many critics would argue is productive, but that some readers prefer to avoid. Because of their sense that the history of colonization is far from over, there is a reluctance on the part of Native writers and critics to endorse post-colonial perspectives, for fear that this might lead to the mistaken assumption that colonialism belongs strictly to the past, but also out of a sense that both colonialism and post-colonialism (as opposed to anti-colonialist stances) take as their main point of reference a sense of periodization based on Euro-Canadian rather than Indigenous history. Thomas King, in his famous essay “Godzilla versus Post-colonial,” while deconstructing such binaries and hierarchies, if anything tends to take the side of Godzilla, a position that *Monkey Beach* quietly endorses (and feminizes) in its many references to sasquatches and related monsters, including the beloved figure of “Bg’wus, the wild man of the woods” (Robinson, 2000 7). This is the sasquatch that the youthful Jimmy is so keen to photograph, that his mother is so eager to deny if not to denounce, that his father imitates in a playful rendition of a sasquatch song and dance performed while wearing the carved sasquatch mask he acquired from uncle Mick (a copy of a copy of a copy), and that his grandmother insists is both real and different from the father’s representation of it. *Bg’wus* is not to be confused with bigfoot, that figure from North American popular culture which has seduced Jimmy, as a young boy, into aiming for first prize in the media’s sasquatch photography contest, hoping to use the prize money to buy his parents a new house, one that would allow them all to live out the American dream. In contrast to Godzilla’s abduction of the willowy blonde heroine (and bad monster movies are not far from the surface in this kind of monkeying around), in female sasquatch country, Lisamarie emerges as the unwitting subject of Jimmy’s camera. To respond to post-colonial theory also entails acknowledging a debt to some of its feminist and other practitioners in the realm of popular culture. The artist figure is, at this point, unaware of her own status as monster and as begetter of monsters. In sasquatch country Lisamarie (who does not speak much Haisla and who fears she never will, despite daily lessons from her grandmother) comes face to face with the hard work of reconnecting with her ancestors while living in a world dominated by mass media. English,

like cameras, is not the best tool for communicating with sasquatches, or for making sense of them. Like *B'gwus*, the red-haired, green-garbed little man who is so easily mistaken for an evil leprauchaun by readers and critics alike, whom her mother would propitiate with Prozac, and who in fact is a spirit associated with the cedar tree, must be approached with caution; nor are his messages always reliable, according to Ma-ma-oo. That he continues to assert himself in Lisamarie's waking dreams at the most unexpected of times is a mixed blessing at best, given that he appears to be a harbinger of death. However, he also represents the gift of vision that Lisamarie inherited from her mother, which is the gift of her Haisla ancestry and bloodline—her history, culture, and identity. At times relegated to the status of submerged memory buried at the back of the closet, her relationship to him needs to be honoured, addressed, and explained—all the more so in that her parents appear to have lost the inclination to pay attention. Reconnecting remains difficult for Lisamarie, but she is determined, choosing to heed her intuition—to listen to her heart, to hear the rhythms of the dance—when all else fails. “Finding the copy of the monkey mask Dad had bought was hard. He kept it in a box stuffed away in the attic, which had never been organized” (Robinson, 2000 168).

If from a Christian missionary's standpoint there is anything that could possibly be more monstrous than a sasquatch (or a sasquatch mask), then surely it must be the female of the species, which some will remember from Emily Carr's paintings of representations of her in West Coast totem poles:

T'sonoqua is not as famous as B'gwus. She covers herself in a cloak and pretends to be an old woman. She will ask for your help, feigning a helpless shake in her hands as she leans on her cane. If you are moved to go close enough for her to see you with her poor vision, she will straighten to her true height, and the hands that grip you will be as strong as a man's. She is an ogress, and she won't let go because, to her, human flesh is the ultimate delicacy and young flesh is especially sweet. But discredited scientists and amateur sleuths aren't hunting her. There are no conferences debating her existence. She doesn't have her own beer commercials. She has a few amusing notes on some anthropology books. She is remembered in scattered campfire tales. But she is, by and large, a dim memory. (Robinson, 2000 337)

When Lisamarie decides to go back to high school and obtain her diploma after dropping out, she decides to write an essay about T'sonoqua: “I

pieced together three of her stories for the final English essay of the year. It was due in two weeks, but it was supposed to be ten pages long and I had only two. I wanted to get it out of the way so I could concentrate on math” (337). The “disconnect” between Haisla and Canadian educational systems and their ways of measuring productivity is reinforced in the next sentence: “I wanted to get it out of the way so I could concentrate on math” (237). The compounded irony of the fact that in stories about her it is T’sonoqua who is known to gobble up little children, especially in a world where boys tend to succeed better at math, and where math counts for more than poetry, is not lost on the reader.

Revisiting this time in her life, Lisamarie’s older self can now make better sense of the past at a stage in her life marked by ambivalence about her gifts, frustration about her lack of knowledge, and a keen sense of the difference separating Indigenous and Western values in the classroom. She must also come to terms with the darker stories of a female sexual, creative, and procreative power that both attracts and repels. Contemporary Indigenous feminisms both challenge and reclaim traditional gender roles as well as the colonizer’s representations of Native women’s sexuality. Their analysis of the Victorian, patriarchal legacy of the Indian Act as something that has negatively affected both men and women, however differently and unequally, shapes their understanding of women’s issues and community history. The young female *b’gwus*, uncle Mick’s “favourite monster,” grows up to challenge colonialist versions of Native women’s victimization, assuming her rightful, unorthodox position in the layered history of Kitamaat and of Monkey Beach, Mama-oo’s traditional homeland and gathering place. The novel makes room for female shamans, female warriors, and female monsters such as T’Sonoqua, but also for female artists and writers, as well as wives and sisters, mothers and daughters, aunties and grandmothers.

In Dialogue: Indigenous Women Writers and British Columbia

By way of conclusion, I would like to draw attention to a few of the questions raised by Manina Jones’ overview of the critical reception of a novel that Eden Robinson cites as one of her influences, the novel *Slash* (1985) by the Okanagan writer Jeannette Armstrong. Armstrong assumes the perspective of a young man nicknamed “Slash” who becomes involved with the American Indian Movement; her novel is considered a key text in the early history of resistance writing by Native people in this country. Eden Robinson has said that *Slash* was “the first book that had characters

from a Rez I could relate to, esp when they see/hear/smell a sasquatch” (Robinson, 2008). Manina Jones remains one of the few non-Native critics to explore what she terms “activist aesthetics” in the pedagogical stance assumed by novels such as Armstrong’s. She opens her overview of critical responses to *Slash* with the following commentary and quote from the novel:

Tommy Kelasket [Slash] accompanies his younger siblings to a charity Christmas party given for Okanagan children by members of the white community. To the surprise and chagrin of the women who organized the event, when gifts for the youngsters are distributed, the children respond by announcing that they have brought their own presents for the priest and other organizers. This reciprocal gesture is met with speechlessness: “They didn’t know what to say. The ladies looked funny like they were ashamed to take the presents”. (48-9)

Jones’s assumption is that Armstrong wishes to critique the white notion of superiority (and its ideological underpinnings) associated with a certain kind of misguided Christian charity, and that the novelist uses obvious irony to do precisely that is clear from the passage and from Jones’s analysis of it. To her credit, Jones is one of the few to address “critical embarrassment” as a site for critical reading that “reconfigures the literary/political relation” (61). At the same time, Jones’s post-colonial reading of how the pedagogy of the novel leads the non-Native reader to come face-to-face with her own preconceptions in fact does not sufficiently consider the different possible meanings contained in the above exchange. Jones does not explicitly address protocols for gift giving in Okanagan society, which might lead to further analysis of barriers to cross-cultural communication as part of the novel’s subtext. Yet even if one is not intimately familiar with the particulars of the potlatch, the giveaway, and the economy of the gift more generally in Indigenous cultures, to make more of the possibility of different Western and Indigenous readings of this “teachable moment” strikes me as productive and a missed opportunity here. Admittedly, British Columbia’s urban classrooms are not overwhelmed by the presence of Okanagan students who see it as their job to educate their non-Native teachers about their tribal traditions; nor does it make sense for graduate seminars in Canadian literature and post-colonial theory to assume an expertise that they do not possess in this area. That said, to consider the place of Nation-specific oral and written sources of information about gift giving traditions in analyzing literary passages in which gifts between Canadian and Okanagan children

are exchanged, makes sense; if nothing else, this might allow for a better appreciation of the humour as well as the poignant silences in novels such as Armstrong's. While *Monkey Beach* is very different in tone and content from *Slash*, Armstrong's sense of humour, and her pregnant silences, clearly resonate with Eden Robinson. Cross-cultural perspectives and intertextual dialogue between First Nations women writers from British Columbia, no less than the kind of intertextual dialogue between Gordon and Eden Robinson's books, might enhance rather than detract from the kinds of work being undertaken by Canadian literary critics. After all, one aspect of Canadian literary history has been the attention it has paid to regional literatures.

A member of the Penticton, B.C. Okanagan band, Armstrong is a key figure in Canada's national as well as regional literary scene, well known as an environmentalist, a community leader, an artist, and founder of the En'owkin International School of Writing, where she teaches creative writing. Jones reminds us that the publication of *Slash* in 1985 was central to the emergence of Theytus Books in Penticton, B.C., an important publisher of Indigenous writing in Canada (60). She also reminds us of the lack of relevant educational resources that B.C. Native youth sorely needed at the time that Gordon Robinson was publishing *Tales of Kitamaat* in the newspapers in the 1950s, which they still needed when Theytus Books was born in the 1980s, and which they still need today. *Slash*'s publication history serves to remind us that it is by no means the first, nor the last book to face provincial education systems' and the Canadian government's failure to address the educational needs of First Nations youth both on and off "the rez." As Jo-ann Archibald, Sto:lo professor of education at the University of British Columbia, reminds us, "[...] the Canadian educational experience for First Nations people has left an intergenerational legacy where First Nations language, culture, and knowledge were denied during the residential school era and omitted or marginalized from public school curriculum," and "the poor state of current-day Aboriginal education is one evident outcome of this colonial legacy" (126). Archibald's own book, *Indigenous Storywork* (2008), turns to Sto:lo grandmothers and elders for sources of insight about traditional and contemporary education. Similarly, Haisla teachers have turned to the oral tradition as well as to Gordon Robinson's published stories as sources of such knowledge. As I see it, this work is consistent with the novel *Ravensong* published by Sto:lo writer and activist Lee Maracle in 1993, a novel set mostly in the 1950s, that explores the importance of a culturally appropriate use of Western as well as Indigenous educational tools and traditions for First Nations youth. Maracle's character Stacey

wishes to attend university so that she can set up a school on her reserve. The novel alludes to the difficulty of establishing native-run schools and native-defined curriculum in First Nations communities, difficulties tied to a lack of understanding on the part of government officials as well as to a lack of fiscal resources. Its opening pages address the deep gap that exists between “whitetown” and Stacey’s village when it comes to each one’s knowledge and understanding of the other’s values, beliefs, cultural points of reference, and opportunities. By the end of the novel, Stacey is helping to break down this sense of isolation and lack of a level playing field, but prejudice dies hard, as does injustice: marrying the young white man who loves her would mean losing her rights on the reserve, something that is not explicitly stated in the novel, and that my students do not always realize.

Thinking about the rich legacy of First Nations writers, educators and activists in B.C. First Nations communities, many of whom are women, it makes sense to me that Eden Robinson’s *Monkey Beach* emerges from this context. That many of us joyfully read and reread *Monkey Beach* for the sheer vicarious pleasure of hanging out with Lisamarie’s friends and family, if only for the space of a few hours or a few days, should not prevent us from paying attention to some of the more pressing issues raised by her text. Indigenous literary critics whose appreciation of Western literary theory is balanced by a Nation-specific sense of oral and written literature are currently engaging in doctoral and post-doctoral research which needs to see the light of day. Their work will help scholars of Canadian literature make better sense of the diversity and richness of Indigenous writing in this country, as well as of the links between that writing and ongoing questions of social justice.

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