

Indigeneity and Diversity in Eden Robinson's Work

Readers approaching Eden Robinson's work from within contemporary colonial Canada seem to desire a writer who will speak to a unique and authentic Native experience. But this is something that Robinson emphatically refuses to do. In an early interview about her 2000 novel *Monkey Beach*, Robinson's interviewer, Suzanne Methot, notes the novelist's rarity in stating that "she is the first Haisla novelist. Ever" (12). Thomas King, in discussing colonial receptions of indigeneity, suggests that "the real value of authenticity is in the rarity of a thing" (56). Robinson is framed as representing a rare position from which to address her readers, a framing that grants her a degree of literary and social value. Colonial audiences are looking for the familiar figure of the Native informant. "But to really understand the old stories," cautions protagonist Lisamarie Hill's grandmother, Ma-ma-oo, in *Monkey Beach*, "you had to speak Haisla" (211). The final unspeakability of Haisla life in English acts as a barrier to cross-cultural appropriation, an important limit on the novel's potential function as a sociological or ethnographic document. And with good reason: in the interview, Robinson states that she "can't write about certain things . . . or someone will go fatwa" on her (Methot 12). While writing a novel about Haisla characters, Robinson encounters limits placed on her by both the spiritual world and her elders. These keep her from discussing certain elements of Haisla life. So while Robinson has to negotiate a readership that generates unrealistic and problematic expectations about her work because of her role as a representative of her community, she also "has to worry about ticking off the denizens of the spiritual world, not to mention the entire Haisla Nation" (Methot 13).

While this essay will be limited to dealing with the work of Eden Robinson and its reception, it contends that the study of literature written in Canada by writers of colour and Indigenous authors is still in need of investigations that are concerned with the cultural industries' and readers' demands or expectations of writers. Colonial audiences continue to exert an immense pressure on work by these authors. As Laura Moss puts it, "stories are often interpreted as fractals of whole communities within a nation replicating with self-similarity" (21), which is a process that leads to erroneous and problematic expectations and readings. In his abstract for the first TransCanada conference, novelist and critic Ashok Mathur argues that after "Canadian writers of colour burst onto the literary scene," their "oppositional aesthetics was quickly co-opted by mainstream institutions." He boldly claims that

the critical and political components of literary production [were] evacuated . . . in favour of "marketable" books. Mainstream Canadian literature so completely absorbed writers of colour through the maw of capital that we became indistinguishable from the corpus of Canadian literature. ("Abstract" n. pag.)

In the final version of the essay, Mathur suggests that writing by writers of colour has "become the body it once opposed"; that is, that this writing has been incorporated wholesale into the corpus of CanLit to the point that many writers of colour "have begun to *represent* CanLit" ("Transubracination" 141). The cultural industries, he suggests, have encouraged these writers to maintain "a desire to keep up" with the mainstream rather than to contest it, a desire that results in "a type of shape-shifting" designed to please a wide reading audience (144). In the process, increasingly conservative writers (or, to put it differently, less radical ones) have come to the forefront as this body of writing becomes a central component of CanLit.

Mathur's analysis might spur an examination of Eden Robinson's oeuvre, one that considers Indigenous writing's particular relationship to colonial Canada and the broad category of the writer of colour. Mathur suggests that critics and readers of literature in Canada have not caught up with the ways in which the publishing industry encourages writers of colour to maintain a muted politics that will address a wide audience while continuing to represent a particular cultural stance. His argument, moreover, suggests that some examples of literature by writers of colour are now received through a rhetoric that reinforces pre-existing idea(l)s of Canadian diversity. For Robinson, however, there is an ambivalence to becoming, through the publication process, part of the body that one is assumed to oppose. As she struggles with how her writing will be recognized both in her community and

mainstream Canadian letters, readers bear witness to a shifting politics in writing in Canada. This is a shifting politics that should caution against the wholesale absorption of Robinson's writing into the Canadian corpus precisely because her writing resists representing Haisla life—an argument that has been previously made by her critics. At the same time—and in this argument this essay departs from the existing scholarship—one result of this resistance to representation is a process of de-specification in Robinson's writing, a resistance to representing the intricacies of Haisla life that renders her work, perhaps paradoxically, less culturally specific. There is a persistent “damned if you do, damned if you don't” situation for a writer like Robinson: if she does act as a representative of her community, she can be damned for doing so—“someone will go fatwa” on her—but if she doesn't maintain her cultural specificity, her absorption into the colonial nation-state may take place through the process of voiding the resistant ethics and aesthetics that such specificity might be said to represent. This essay interrogates Robinson's writing in order to unpack this bind.

Eden Robinson's work—especially *Monkey Beach*—provides an excellent example of the ambivalent forms of recognition that face Indigenous writers. This novel displays anxiety about how it will be recognized as either a representative “Native” text or as a more universal/Western novel aimed at a mainstream audience. And it encodes literary elements that allow it to be read in either register, resisting categorization—and in the process generating a fair bit of academic head-scratching. *Monkey Beach* is set in the village of Kitamaat on the northern coast of British Columbia, near the settler town of Kitimat. Protagonist Lisamarie is growing into an adolescence characterized by violence and loss. Her brother Jimmy is missing at sea, along with the boat *The Queen of the North* and its captain, Josh. Both Jimmy and Josh are likely dead.¹ Lisa experiences the loss of other family members, rape, and pathologization for her encounters with the spirit world, which frequently take the form of a small, prophetic man who portends disaster. Her proximity with this spiritual realm connects her to what critics have seen as a more traditionally Native worldview, one in which Lisa might recover her sense of self and come to see her capacities for parapsychical perception as enabling rather than troubling, as a valuable asset to her community (Castricano 802).

Robinson's novel, however, should not be read as a straightforwardly “Native” one (as though there were such a thing in the first instance). I began to think more about *Monkey Beach* after Lee Maracle commented to Smaro Kamboureli and myself in an interview that she wasn't sure that, for

her, *Monkey Beach* qualified as a Haisla book because Robinson wrote like a mainstream writer. This comment forced my reconsideration and pushed me to look again at Robinson's other published work. On the one hand, of course Robinson is a Haisla writer (and Heiltsuk on her mother's side), and her work can also be seen as such. But, on the other hand, what if Maracle's comment were to be taken seriously? What would that mean for Robinson's writing? What would a Haisla novel look like? More generally, how does a work qualify as a "Native" text?

In her recent book *Taxidermic Signs: Reconstructing Aboriginality*, Pauline Wakeham convincingly argues for the proximity of the taxidermic practice of wildlife "preservation" to museological and anthropological visions for Indigenous people as a "vanishing race" within the colonial imaginary. Wakeham reads taxidermy as a semiological practice that inscribes death and life in a single gesture—through the re-animation of dead bodies through their lifelike stances in displays. In doing so, she incisively illustrates how indigeneity is associated in the colonial imagination with disappearance and death in its conflation with animality and nature. This association takes place, she notes, even—or especially—when the colonial imagination is engaged in ostensibly benevolent acts of "preserving" aboriginality in the face of Western encroachments. These associations between indigeneity, death, and disappearance strongly shape expectations of how Indigenous people will perform and how cultural work about Indigenous life will look to viewers. "Within museum spaces," Wakeham contends, "the microphysics of biopower work to shape the corporeal and affective responses of visitors while attempting to dissimulate the work of social discourses in the guise of supposedly 'natural' or 'biological' responses," responses that leave intact the association between indigeneity and taxidermy. Wakeham notes that, of course, "the affective and corporeal responses of visitors are never just 'innate' or 'pure' but always already mediated by power" (69). The spectator—colonial or otherwise—who views Indigenous "artifacts" and other displays within museological spaces, in other words, has already had her or his responses shaped by dominant discourses that frame indigeneity. It is important to recognize how these responses are shaped as natural even though they derive from very specific practices of colonial control.

Wakeham's analysis does not specifically read books as taxidermic spaces, but her work creates a space for this essay to extend analysis in that direction. As a technology for preserving historical details and narratives, the book plays an arguably similar role to the phonographs and films that

Wakeham discusses; indeed, many of the early recordings by anthropologists in the Pacific Northwest, for instance, formed the basis of subsequent books. Moreover, for much of its history in the West, the codex has been an explicitly taxidermic technology, constructed from the preserved skins of animals in the form of vellum and encased within leather covers designed to highlight the importance and liveliness (Wakeham uses the term “liveness”) of the materials inside. And, similarly, the responses of readers are never innate but are always already shaped by power. In a textual context, Renée Hulan reminds us that “asserting cultural difference can be a way of containing it” for the dominant, as images of what she terms “pan-Native identity” remain “susceptible to . . . appropriation and misrepresentation” for readers (77, 78). Within the technological and taxidermic matrix of the book, self-representations by Indigenous peoples remain fraught, despite vigorous and sustained cultural production designed to implicate colonial readings’ racisms. Readers of books have their responses governed by power that imagines, as Wakeham argues, Indigenous people as animals, as historical curiosities, and as, ultimately, vanishing.

While the colonial imaginary’s mediation of images of Aboriginality is well-known in Canada, discussed also by critics such as Terry Goldie, the Indigenous imaginary has, in turn, created expectations of its own that are less often discussed; Lee Maracle’s comment is precisely one such example. Thomas King, writing in *The Truth About Stories*, notes that not only was “the idea of ‘the Indian’ . . . fixed in time and space” by Romantic ideals within colonial communities (37), but that later, in turn, “being recognized as an Indian was critical” within Indigenous communities. “We dressed up in a manner to substantiate the cultural lie that had trapped us,” King writes (45). This costuming is partly a political response to colonial power, a response that leads back to the referent against which it reacts, back to the colonial imaginary and its taxidermic vision. Recalling a series of questions that he was once asked by a Native-composed selection committee for a grant, King proposes the following questions as markers of Aboriginal authenticity that would fulfill the “crucial” need for recognition within Native communities: “were you born on a reserve? . . . Do you speak your Native language? . . . Do you participate in your tribe’s ceremonies? . . . Are you a full-blood? . . . Are you a status Indian? . . . Are you enrolled?” (55-56). These largely external markers of indigeneity denote expectations that allow viewers—both Indigenous and non-Indigenous—to see the Native body as Native; in their absence, King posits, the authenticity of the Indigenous body falls into

question and is made, by extension, into a marker of Native disappearance into the contemporary, Western world. Looking at a statue of Will Rogers, King is asked the following by his brother: "I know he's an Indian . . . and you know he's an Indian, but how is anyone else going to be able to tell?" (42). Being able to tell is, clearly, an important criterion.

With Robinson, however, one can rarely tell much of anything too easily, and this ambivalence—or what Mathur calls "shape-shifting"—both stymies audiences and enables a reframing of what "Native" writing in Canada might look like. In her first book, the volume of short stories *Traplins*, Robinson uses extreme violence to characterize the lives of characters who are poor and working class, but are otherwise not often marked as Native, aside from in the book's final story, "Queen of the North," which was subsequently expanded into *Monkey Beach*. This practice of avoiding ethno-cultural demarcation leads critic Vikki Visvis to suggest that "the ambiguity and ambivalence that proliferate in her work allow for dynamic, constantly shifting configurations of the Native world" (53), and pushes critic Cynthia Sugars even further, to the claim that Robinson's practice is one that thoroughly "frustrates the readers' desire to interpret her characters on the basis of their ethno-cultural identity" (78). This ambiguity, and the frequent, apparently deliberate removal of such markings parallels Toni Morrison's discussion of her early story "Recitatif" in *Playing in the Dark*. "Recitatif" was, Morrison tells us, "an experiment in the removal of all racial codes from a narrative about . . . characters . . . for whom racial identity is crucial" (xi). The importance of such "racial codes" emerges, it seems, in critical writing that focuses upon them.

Robinson's most recent novel, *Blood Sports*, published in 2006, furthers this discussion. The novel is a gruesome one, set in Vancouver focusing on the life of a young character named Tom Bauer, his cousin Jeremy Rieger, and his girlfriend Paulina Mazenkowski. It is, like *Monkey Beach*, a longer version of one of the stories in *Traplins*, this time of a story first called "Contact Sports." The initial story, as read by Helen Hoy in her book *How Do I Read These?*, functions as an allegory for colonialism, in which the violence of Jeremy represents the colonial invader, and Tom's responses correspond to those of Native society. Hoy is explicit in stating that she reads the text allegorically because Robinson is an Indigenous woman. For Hoy, the word "contact" in the story's title indicates the suspended Native narrative that is couched beneath the racially unmarked surface of the text. Robinson has stated, however, that she does not wish to be limited by being termed a Native writer. She comments that "once you've been put in the box

of being a native writer then it's hard to get out" (qtd. in Hoy 153). In a move that seems almost to be a response to Hoy's reading of the story that became her recent novel, she shifts the title from "Contact Sports" to *Blood Sports*, thereby foreclosing some of the allegorical temptation, and she specifies in the course of the narrative that the characters with whom she is dealing are "Hispanic" and "Caucasian" (the latter term is repeated at least ten times). Although Toni Morrison does not suggest the same of her experiment with "Recitatif," the removal of "racial codes" in Robinson's original story left readers free to impose their assumptions about the sorts of characters that a Native woman would or could write about. The result is that readers like Hoy transposed Robinson's identity onto her characters, and the insistent use of the raciological term "Caucasian" in the later novel reads as a response to this transposition. *Blood Sports* could likely be allegorized anew, but Robinson resists being contained within the term "Native writer," expressing a need to maintain the ability to represent more than Native experiences. This desire is, of course, fair. The ghettoization of writers into essentialized ethno-cultural categories is of a piece with the history of the representation of Indigenous peoples as vanishing. It is also consistent with Canadian colonialism, in which Native writers are associated with a fixed point of origin—their indigeneity tied to taxidermic notions of tradition and history rather than to the present—a position that limits their participation in contemporary life and their ability to posit self-governance.

Monkey Beach is, however, packaged, marketed, discussed, and written as a Native text. Hoy describes the agent-prepared publicity packet that accompanied the initial release of *Traplines* as follows: it "included a map of the Haisla territories and nineteen Haisla reserves, decorated with ovoid West Coast Native designs (hummingbird, killer whale)." Additionally, "the same designs appear," she notes, "on the cover of the packet and the title page of excerpts" of the pre-release of *Monkey Beach* (174). The text includes lengthy passages that describe the community's practices, such as making oolichan grease and harvesting the oxasuli plant. But *Monkey Beach* similarly challenges its categorization in its embrace of popular culture, pushing it towards a more universal or generally North American register. Strategies that mirror those used in *Traplines* and *Blood Sports* are witnessed in *Monkey Beach*, as the novel shies away from embracing an uncritically or stereotypically "Native" perspective. It can be packaged as a Native book, but it cannot easily be read, as Jennifer Andrews and others have noted, as a conventionally Native text. There is a clash between the packaging and the content in this

respect. This resistance to what Robinson seems to see as Indigenous closure is a result, in part, of Lisamarié's own anxieties about her Haisla heritage, one from which she and her community have been alienated through colonialism. The parapsychical elements of her life push against a perspective that essentializes Native stories as historical and mythological, from the little man whom Lisa sees, to the prominent though absent figure of the Sasquatch or *b'gwus*, who moves from a variety of Native cultures to the colonial imaginary and back again. The little man, for instance, is described in ways that cross cultural borders: "sometimes he came dressed as a leprechaun," Lisa tells us, but the night before her uncle Mick's death he wore a "strange cedar tunic with little amulets dangling around his neck and waist. His hair was standing up like a troll doll's, a wild, electric red" (132). Critics suggest that, to quote Rob Appleford, "the central problem posed by the novel as a whole" is "how to reconcile the ambiguity of the text with what many critics assume to be the project of Aboriginal writers, namely the articulation of a cohesive and non-Othering subject position" (87). This is not Robinson's project, Appleford demonstrates, as Robinson fills her novel with popular references, with genre-blurring mythologies, and with elliptical moments that foreclose her role as a Native informant. Instead, she focuses on the discomfitures of Lisa's growing up in a non-cohesive Indigenous community that has lost much of its self-understanding and whose violence closely mirrors that of white communities nearby.

The text is therefore careful to avoid being reduced to what might be badly termed a Native novel, one that operates according to the ideals that King both discusses and challenges above. Andrews argues that "Robinson's text traces the return of the repressed in a distinctly Native context, insisting on the complex and lasting impacts of non-Native colonization and exploring the increasing presence of Western mass culture in tribal communities" (21). But it seems to be against such a statement that Jodey Castricano analyzes unspeakability in the novel, stating that here "the 'unspeakable' consists of the real and material effects of the forced relocation of Aboriginal people by the government of Canada pursuant to the *Indian Act*" as well as other injustices (802). Andrews seems to overemphasize colonization, which is surprisingly muted in the text. It is, rather, one of the key unspeakables with which Castricano is concerned, an ever-present but unspoken trauma. Such unspeakability is everywhere in *Monkey Beach*. In part, the novel's silences are the result of Lisa's youth, in which she remains largely ignorant of Haisla culture, but it is also a calculated tactic. Comments made to Lisa, or conversations between adults, are

fractured mid-sentence, suspended so as to protect her from harmful knowledge. But these ellipses also have the effect of removing the cultural specificity of the text and pushing it towards a more universal register.

Many of these ellipses, interestingly, hearken to Robinson's literary predecessors in Native Canadian literature. Lisa's uncle Mick, a former American Indian Movement (AIM) activist who could have stepped from the pages of Jeannette Armstrong's *Slash*, provides the clearest example. When he comes into the story, Lisa's mother says to him "I thought you were . . . I mean, we heard the standoff went, um, badly and we thought . . ." (22; ellipses in original). We don't find out which standoff Mick was at or what issues he has been contesting, although those aware of AIM will have a sense of his values.² His stories are fragmented, and his political arguments cut short, as in the following discussion, where Mick and Lisa's father, Mick's brother Albert, sit down to take care of his taxes:

"I don't see why we have to file at all," Mick said. "The whole fucking country is on Indian land. We're not supposed to pay any taxes on or off reserves."

"God, don't start again," Dad said.

"This whole country was built on exploiting Indians for—"

"Mick," Dad pleaded. (30-31)

These sorts of interventions into discussions of Indigenous politics are constant, leaving Lisa (and the novel's readers) with a diminished sense of the stakes of being Haisla in Canada. Lisa asks Mick a series of questions about his struggles and arrest—"Did you really get shot? . . . Who shot you? Did you shoot him back? How come you went to jail" (52)—only to be rebuffed by Mick with a request for a glass of water and the dismissive statement that "it's a long story, all grown-up and silly" (53). At Lisa's insistence, he tells her some of the story, but shies away from providing details. Later we learn that Mick participated in the occupation of the Bureau of Indian Affairs office in Washington, DC, an event that is fully treated in Armstrong's novel. Uncle Mick, however, is routinely cut short, either through self-censorship or by being interrupted, and we learn little of his experience.

The ellipses in the text evoke other books studied under the rubric of Indigenous writing. Lisa's mother's brief mention of the history of epidemics to hit Native communities is hauntingly described in Lee Maracle's novel *Ravensong*. Lisa's mother tells her that the people "just died" (100), however, this is a blunt statement that is consistent with the rationalizing mindset that her mother displays throughout the novel. And later in the text, while in Terrace, Lisa faces off against a carload of white men who threaten to rape

her, an event that takes place in the most painful terms in Beatrice Culleton's novel *In Search of April Raintree*. Coming to *Monkey Beach* with a knowledge of Indigenous writing in which the ellipses of the text are evocative of literary engagements with colonial violences perpetrated against Native peoples, gives one a different experience of reading the novel than if one does not come to it with such knowledge. Readers are pushed into extending their reading on the basis of their contextual knowledge. In Culleton's *In Search of April Raintree*, the rape of April and her sister Cheryl's eventual suicide are couched in an awakening search for a self that understands and values itself as Métis, and the violence that is done against the two women acts as a tragic catalyst for April's eventual recovery of her selfhood. In *Monkey Beach*, on the other hand, Lisa is raped by her friend, nicknamed Cheese, shortly after she returns to the village after confronting her would-be white rapists. If one is attentive to the echoes of *April Raintree*, one is presented with a difficult transposition of violence against Native women from a white context into a Native one, one in which Canada's explicit colonial legacy is de-emphasized in favour of a focus upon violence within the community. Sugars suggests that Robinson's writing "highlights the violent history of Native-white relations, while resisting idealized versions of the Native" (82). While this is certainly the case here—white violence is evoked just as the Haisla village is far from idealized—the way in which the text defeats this idealization is complex. Robinson is both "appropriating and reformulating the discourse of savagery" as Sugars suggests (79), but in a way that might reduce all violence to the same level, in which colonial and communal violence exist on par.

These sorts of slippages between white and Haisla violence are structurally important to the novel, moreover, and lead to its conclusion, in which we learn that Lisa's brother Jimmy has died, but that before he died he killed fellow villager Josh. Josh was sexually abused while in residential school and has learned, himself, to be sexually aggressive and volatile. He had impregnated Jimmy's girlfriend Adelaine—nicknamed Karaoke—who went to Vancouver for an abortion, an act that spurs Jimmy to beat Josh to death with a paddle and to sink his fishing boat. The sexual, psychological, and physical trauma faced by the characters Josh, Mick, and Trudy in residential school—described in textual gaps that evoke the pain of Tomson Highway's novel *Kiss of the Fur Queen*—is glanced over in favour of the violence done within the community. Visvis writes of Robinson's earlier short story version of the narrative that Josh's "violation of Adelaine can be read . . . as a distinct dimension of his traumatic experience" of sexual abuse at residential school

(43). Violence predicated upon the history of colonization underwrites the novels' characters' lives, but, without a knowledge of this context, both literary and historical, the novel risks universalizing its violence, making it of a piece with the threats that are witnessed within colonial society. The colonial framework is palimpsestically overwritten through gaps and moments of unspeakability, the historical effects of colonization partially effaced, and what we are to do with those gaps becomes an ethical problem. Visvis writes that Robinson's work

encourages the reader to approach the traumatic event in light of historical circumstances specific to Native culture, and [also] disallows a culturally specific understanding of traumatic symptoms and cures by promoting, to some degree, accepted Western perspectives. . . . (47)

While Visvis is concerned with methods of treating trauma—those are the Western perspectives about which she writes—culturally specific understandings are further frustrated by the elliptical treatment of the text's Native context, moving this novel towards a broad potential audience.

Robinson is neither right nor wrong for adopting the strategy of simultaneously evoking and avoiding what might be deemed more "authentic" Native literary structures. This essay sees these as strategies to prevent the straightforward placement of her work within the category of Native literature (with the interpretive foreclosure that Robinson suggests follows from this placement) as well as the uncomplicated absorption of her writing into the broad category of "ethnic" literature—or mainstream writing by writers of colour—with which Mathur is concerned. The difficulty comes in when readers assume that Robinson is acting as a representative of her community, or Native communities in general. She runs the risk of being criticized for her work's not being Native or Haisla enough—as in Maracle's comment—or, alternatively, of packaging her ethnicity such that it becomes a market commodity. One critically astute statement about the novel could be reversed, seen as a threat to Indigenous ways of living in this context: Appleford suggests that "Robinson recognizes . . . that a hermetic, authentic Aboriginal selfhood is unattainable" (96). If this is the case—and Appleford cites Thomas King, Sherman Alexie, and Daniel David Moses as Robinson's antecedents—then this position is potentially threatening to Indigenous writers and people who are seeking to decolonize themselves. Appleford discusses the idea of this selfhood on the basis of Robinson's practice of mixing what are taken to be Native (which I read in this case as traditional, historical) aspects of life with what are taken to be mainstream or colonial ones. This

may be simply to recognize that no self is pure, at least not in a (post-) post-modern context, and to follow a deconstructive line of reasoning. Robinson suggests this argument with the quotation with which this paper began, in which Lisa's Ma-ma-oo suggests that speaking Haisla is a prerequisite to cultural knowledge. The past is unrecoverable, it seems, even the colonial past, and the present, as a result, needs to be reckoned with. But what is the source of the community's violence? Blame seems to be laid at the feet of Mick, Cheese, and the Haisla community in its failure to attain coherence—one that seems to be impossible. With the blame laid at the community's feet, it seems important to ask whether colonialism is effaced in the process such that Canada is let off the hook. Should the role of colonialism not be highlighted in creating the conditions for this violence? Put more broadly, does *Monkey Beach*, in its simultaneous adoption and disavowal of cultural specificity and informancy, become one of the everyday iterations of diversity in Canada that allows the nation to reproduce itself in the present and into the future? Or is it, instead, a critique of the ways in which the Native body is expected to perform itself in writing? Hoy pursues a similar, though more general question: "must all Native writing," she asks, "be reduced to a singular narrative of colonization and resistance?" (164).

The novel concludes with an ambiguity that prevents these questions from being given an easy answer. Lisa has been riding her father's speedboat across the inlets of northern BC in order to meet her parents in their search for Jimmy, and she stops at Monkey Beach, the beach upon which she once saw a Sasquatch. On this trip she has a vision of her grandmother and her uncle Mick, who have both died, as well as of Jimmy. The characters give her advice: Jimmy asks her to tell Adelaine that he loves her, Mick tells her to "go out there and give 'em hell," and her grandmother tells her to "go home and make [her] some grandkids" (373). But she pauses on the beach, and readers do not know whether she will return home, or in what manner. This open-ended conclusion prevents closure, much like the ambiguous ending of Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*, where readers do not know whether the narrator returns to the city to confront what she sees as the American menace. The text cannot, as a result, be placed into the category of Indigenous literature in a narrative of redemption in which she will return to her community, but neither can its role as Indigenous literature be discounted. Hoy concludes that in *Traplins* Robinson

seriously damages the capacity of white culture to allocate to itself all that remains after the racial / cultural reserves have been allotted. In so doing she

makes 'Native writer' a less constricting designation and helps move us towards a point where the asymmetrical deployment of such categories becomes less pervasive and problematic. (182)

This argument is both apt and insufficient for *Monkey Beach*. It is apt in that this "Native novel" radically widens the category—if it is read simplistically as such—because it self-consciously plays with "crucial" tests of Indigenous authenticity like those posited by King. Moss argues that readers have been compelled to understand Robinson's characters on a racial and/or cultural basis because of "a linking of critical expectation based on authorial identity and an expected socially transformative outcome" (26), and poses the challenge to readers of de-linking such expectations. At the same time, this novel's representation of Haisla community risks excusing the past through its focus on the present, and it moves towards a more general category of work that might be open to appropriation in the colonial imaginary. Kamboureli notes that "CanLit has been subject to a relentless process of institutionalization" (vii), one important part of which is generic. Castricano and Andrews talk about the book as, respectively, "Canadian gothic" and "Native Canadian Gothic," and the novel can also be read as a *Bildungsroman*. But the conjunction of the terms "Native" and "Canadian" here suggest the slippage towards the national mainstream with which Mathur is concerned. The term "Native" can neither be left out or assumed, and this essay is left reckoning with the ways in which *Monkey Beach* is being absorbed into the everyday processes that celebrate Canada's diversity and differences without recognizing the specificities of cultural heritage. This book walks a very difficult line, especially if it is taken to be representative of the community about which it speaks, let alone Indigenous literature more generally. It becomes necessary to recover the silences in Eden Robinson's writing, lest readers too easily assume any of her narrative turns.

NOTES

- 1 An uncanny coincidence: in *Monkey Beach*, two people, Jimmy and Josh, go missing when *The Queen of the North* vanishes. Six years after the book's publication, on the 22nd of March, 2006, a BC Ferries vessel of the same name sank along the northern coast of British Columbia, off Gil Island, within range of the missing boat in *Monkey Beach*. Two people, Shirley Rosette and Gerald Foisy, remain missing.
- 2 An attentive reading suggests, however, that he was involved with the 1973 standoff at the Pine Ridge Reservation and its aftermath, since he later reveals that he was involved in an argument with the Guardians of the Oglala Nation (Goons) around the time Lisa was born (53).

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