

“Close, very close,
a *b’gwus* howls”

The Contingency of Execution in
Eden Robinson’s *Monkey Beach*

All too frequently, Aboriginal artists are viewed (by Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals alike) as impersonal explicators of truths about their culture. Eager to see the negative images of the past replaced by ones more representative of Aboriginal life and history, many critics assume that the work of Aboriginal artists must be interpreted according to strict conceptual frameworks. In this context, Claude Lévi-Strauss’s distinction between two types of artists seems pertinent: “the engineer works by means of concepts and the *bricoleur* by means of signs” (19–20). The Aboriginal artist is often perceived as an “engineer” who proceeds with conceptual foreknowledge of the project of cultural expression, and whose artistry lies in the deft deployment of specially designed tools, in this case the certain signs of culture. Both dominant and resistant tropes of aboriginality operate within the engineer model, which serves the editorial function of eliminating elements not consonant with or not “authentic enough” for a tacitly or explicitly conceived project of Aboriginal cultural expression. In his influential discussion of Lévi-Strauss, Jacques Derrida argues that the very notion of the engineer is an impossibility, since such an entity would have to be “the absolute origin of his own discourse,” creating “the totality of his language, syntax, and lexicon” (256). For Derrida, all discourse is *bricolage*, bound by “the necessity of borrowing one’s concepts from the text of a heritage which is more or less coherent or ruined” (255). The desire for an Aboriginal engineer is motivated by a fundamental need for a cultural subject, one either open to cooption or enshrinement as a transcendental truth.

One author whose work has exposed the difficulty of applying the engineer model is Eden Robinson. Robinson’s collection of short stories entitled

Traplines (1996) and her first novel *Monkey Beach* (2000) have been widely praised, but they have also elicited problematic responses from critics. After engaging in an avowedly “allegorical” reading of one story in *Traplines* entitled “Contact Sports,” in which ethnically unidentified characters are read as enacting “the narrative of colonization, past and present” (159), Helen Hoy questions the engineering model of analysis which has permitted such a culturally normative reading: “Rather than redeploying given notions of Native history and culture in my analysis, I might more profitably read *Traplines* as a site of contestation of such notions, as enacting (in dynamic ways) and not merely (re)articulating Nativeness” (181). Similarly, yet without Hoy’s questioning of the contested notions that inform “Nativeness,” Jennifer Andrews argues that in *Monkey Beach*, “evil is primarily associated with Eurocentric interventions in the Haisla community rather than [with] individual Native characters” (12). Andrews’ view that the Eurocentric interventions destabilize a coherent, cohesive Haisla community—and thus cause evil—presupposes that the novel presents a stable Haisla worldview to be contaminated. Both Hoy’s and Andrews’ discussions of Robinson’s work reveal the vexed project of evaluating Aboriginal writing both as the product of normative cultural engineering (in Lévi-Strauss’ sense), and as the product of the unstable cultural *bricolage* that marks contemporary Aboriginal life. Clearly, the “myth” of the cultural engineer, who uses structures and tools for a deliberately conceived end, can shape how aboriginality is understood.

If we return to Lévi-Strauss’ distinction between the engineer and the *bricoleur*, it becomes clear that contemporary Aboriginal artists are caught between these two views of culture—culture-as-concept (or culture-as-certainty), and culture-as-signs (or culture-as-contingency). Lévi-Strauss describes the circumstances of traditional tribal expression as a three-fold contingency involving occasion, execution, and function: occasion is both exterior and prior to the creative act, and inspires the artist in his or her fashioning of the materials at hand; execution involves the limitations of the material; and function involves an awareness of how the work will be utilized, whether as ornament, tool, or sacred object. The most crucial type of contingency with respect to *Monkey Beach* is the second—the contingency of execution—for the limitations of the medium or cultural materials, and the resistance they offer to the author fuel the creative tension in the novel and expose the fallacy of the Aboriginal artist as engineer. Studying Aboriginal artistic expression requires considering how Aboriginal artists

recombine idiosyncratic and contingent elements of Aboriginal culture: *bricolage* as artistic practice. Eden Robinson does not simply “show us” Aboriginal culture-as-concept; she presents highly personal dialogues with Haisla/Heiltsuk culture that are often filled with elision, tactical irony, and unanswered questions.¹ *Monkey Beach* ends with an opaque passage which illustrates just this sort of elision:

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

This final passage neatly illustrates the central problem posed by the novel as a whole: how to reconcile the ambiguity in the text with what many critics assume to be the project of Aboriginal writers, namely, the articulation of a cohesive and non-Othering indigenous subject position. Clearly, this passage can be read as a conclusive coda to a novel about a young Haisla woman's struggle to find her place in the world. In this vein, the narrator Lisamarie Hill, after undergoing trials as a troubled teen and a Haisla woman, survives a near drowning and encounters the spirits of her family, and succeeds in “finding strength in the past and a way to cope with the challenges of the present” (Andrews 20). All Lisamarie (and the reader, one presumes) has to do is lie still and wait for the speedboat.

While I do find this redemptive reading attractive, my experience reading and teaching the novel suggests other, less comforting possibilities. My undergraduate students (often uncomfortable with anti-positivist open endings) complain that this ending frustrates any tidy resolution of the central narrative and seriously compromises any strictly rite-of-passage interpretation. “Is Lisamarie dead?” they ask. “What's going on?” (Close, very close, my students howl.) Eden Robinson has admitted that the novel's open ending has perplexed even her own family, who think that she should have supplied some degree of resolution to Lisamarie Hill's story. However, she refuses to clarify Lisamarie's fate (Robinson “Reading”). While I hesitate to claim that I can “solve” the mystery of the novel's ending to anyone's satisfaction, I have chosen to pursue one ambiguous element in this final passage—the *b'gwus* or Sasquatch whose howl is “not quite human, not quite wolf, but something in between”—to argue for a critical reading that emphasizes the novel's strategic ambiguity and cultural *bricolage*. Robinson's novel exploits the ambiguity of this *b'gwus* figure to unify the novel around the theme of judgement and retribution, and to foreground

the fundamental anxiety over the inscription of Haisla cultural values within the text.

The *b'gwus* or Sasquatch is both a ubiquitous presence in West Coast First Nations mythology and a co-opted sign in settler culture. As Robinson states in a section of the novel entitled "In Search of the Elusive Sasquatch," "His image is even used to sell beer, and he is portrayed as a laid-back kind of guy, lounging on mountaintops in patio chairs, cracking open a frosty one" (317). Thus, Robinson allows the reader to see the *b'gwus* as another example of popular culture, to be catalogued with the myriad other examples in the novel, such as *Dynasty*, *Elvis*, *Air Supply*, and supermarket tabloids. Yet, the *b'gwus* as it is employed in the novel is also associated with Haisla cultural values, spiritual power, and real terror.

When Lisamarie's brother Jimmy is young, he becomes obsessed with the *b'gwus* figure. Excited by the stories told to him by his father, Jimmy is determined to capture the *b'gwus* on film in order to earn the thirty-thousand-dollar reward offered by the tabloid *World Weekly Globe*. Jimmy successfully begs his father and mother to take a family trip to Monkey Beach, a reputed *b'gwus* hangout. Lisamarie, disgusted by her brother's gullibility, nevertheless tags along, the designated babysitter for her baby brother. One morning on the beach, Lisamarie awakes to find the beach deserted. Hearing Jimmy's elated yell—"I found him! I found him!" (15)—she crashes into the woods in angry pursuit:

Suddenly, every hair on my body prickled. The trees were thick, and beneath them everything was hushed . . . I could hear myself breathing. I could feel someone watching me. "Jimmy?" . . . I turned very slowly. No one was behind me. I turned back and saw him. Just for a moment, just a glimpse of a tall man, covered in brown fur. He gave me a wide, friendly smile, but he had too many teeth and they were all pointed. He backed into the shadows, then stepped behind a cedar tree and vanished. I couldn't move. Then I heard myself screaming, and I stood there, not moving. Jimmy came running with his camera ready. He broke through the bushes and started snapping pictures wildly, first of me screaming and then of the woods around us. (15–16)

This encounter could be read simply as one of Lisamarie's many encounters with the uncanny in the novel, but it is, in fact, a defining moment in the development of Lisamarie's character.

Although the Haisla word *b'gwus* means literally "wild man of the woods," and is associated in Robinson's novel with hairy male hominids, the word has a complex etymology that includes creatures other than the one typically associated with Sasquatch. The anthropologist Marjorie

Halpin has convincingly argued that the term *b'gwus*, common to the Nisga'a, Gitksan, Tsimshian, Kwakw'ala, and Haisla languages, has evolved from an older root word *pa'gwus* or *pi'kis*, defined by anthropologists in at least four different ways: "monkey," "monkey woman," "wealth woman," and "land otter woman" (212–20).² While the first meaning of the word has become dominant, the last two glosses are particularly important in relation to Robinson's novel. "Wealth woman" is a figure common to both Tsimshian and Gitksan peoples, a human-like creature that carries a crying child on her back. When virtuous men (almost always men) hear the cry of the child in the woods, they are compelled to follow the cry deep into the trees. The anthropologist George Emmons recorded a Gitksan version of the typical "wealth woman" encounter in 1915:

Only one without fault could see this miraculous creature, and when the voice [of the child] called, [the human] was obliged to follow. . . . [The human] must then take the child, which immediately appeared to be human. The mother pleaded for her infant and it was returned to her, whereupon she agreed to grant any wish asked. (365–66)

"Wealth woman" can only be met by those who do not expect or want to encounter her. Yet, while *pa'gwus* or *pi'kis* is frequently a beneficent figure in individual encounters, several stories from Tsimshian and Gitksan informants cast her as an avenging figure, a scourge who destroys entire villages where "proper marriages are not taking place" (Halpin 215). In some of these stories, "wealth woman" is associated or conflated with the land otter, hence the gloss "land otter woman." In these tales, "land otter woman" leaves her crying child afloat in the ocean, and sea otter hunters are lured, as if by sirens, to rescue it, resulting in their death by drowning. The "land otter woman" could also drive people insane, especially those who hear her child's cry and become possessed by the land otter spirit. In contrast to "wealth woman," who is associated with both the purity of the individual witness—and the potential of reward for this purity—and the punishment of communities for violations of sexual taboos, "land otter woman" is clearly a figure of individual punishment. She is typically seen by those who are deemed "sinful" or "guilty." Thus, the *b'gwus*, who is now typically associated with the "wild man of the woods," has older and more complex associations with purity, sin, wealth, death, and insanity.³

Robinson's *Monkey Beach* incorporates these traditional resonances, especially the inherent tension between "wealth woman" as judge or scourge, and "land otter woman" as a symbol of spirit possession. When Jimmy

hears Lisamarie's terrified scream at seeing the "tall man, covered in brown fur," he "[breaks] through the bushes and start[s] snapping pictures wildly, first of [Lisamarie] screaming and then of the woods around [them]." This detail is perhaps incidental, underlining either Jimmy's foolishness or (from a traditional Haisla perspective) his unworthiness for a *b'gwus* encounter because he desires it so much. Yet, what if Jimmy *did* capture the *b'gwus* on film? What if Lisamarie is the *b'gwus* he has been so desperate to find?

Although Andrews argues for a conceptual linkage between Lisamarie and the traditional figure of T'sonoqua in the novel, a "basket ogress" figure for whom "human flesh is the ultimate delicacy" (Andrews 18; Robinson 337), the consistent connection between Lisamarie and the *b'gwus* is difficult to ignore. While hardly a hairy hominid with too many pointed teeth, Lisamarie is described in the novel in ways which link her to the "wild man of the woods." Uncle Mick calls her "Monster," and one of her first acts of schoolyard self-assertion when tormented by Frank is to sink her teeth deeply into Frank's "butt" (65). "You are an evil little monster," accuses Frank's mother at the hospital, while Uncle Mick enthuses that Lisamarie is "my favourite monster in the whole wide world" (67). But the *b'gwus* motif does more than simply "explain" Lisamarie's "monstrous" nature: it introduces into the contemporary Haisla context traditional concepts of crime and retribution.

The etymology of *b'gwus* reveals its connection to "wealth woman," with her double liminal roles of benefactor and judge, policing the boundaries of both purity and the *proprie*. Robinson demonstrates her familiarity with this aspect of the *b'gwus* by including in the novel a story of adultery, attempted murder, and the *b'gwus* as supernatural agent of retribution. Lisamarie is told a story by her grandmother Ma-ma-oo about "a beautiful woman who was having an affair with her husband's brother." After clubbing her husband and leaving him for dead, the beautiful woman and her brother-in-law return to bury the body. Instead of the body, they find "large footprints in the sand." The supposedly dead husband has transformed into a *b'gwus*, and he kills both his brother and his adulterous wife (211). The Haisla have a tradition of tales involving the violation of marriage taboos by both human and supernatural agents (Olson 185–188), but Ma-ma-oo's story also foreshadows an adulterous affair much more central to the life of Lisamarie. When Lisamarie, her mother, and Uncle Mick (her brother-in-law) take a trip to Kitlope, Lisamarie wanders off to explore a deserted village. Lisamarie, upon her return to the camp's cabin, observes an unsettling

scene: “[My mother] was frying corned beef. Mick was sneaking up on her, and I stepped back onto the porch so I wouldn’t ruin the surprise. He came up behind her, encircled her waist with his arms and gave her a gentle kiss on the neck. She pulled his arms off, slowly, then pushed him away, eyes downcast.” After witnessing this intimate scene, Lisamarie “felt like [she] was going to throw up” (122). Interestingly, this episode is never mentioned again in the novel. But its import is clear: Lisamarie’s family is hiding a secret, one of many just below the surface of the narrative.

In fact, the novel contains a series of interlocking crimes, which, if revealed, necessitate some sort of moral judgement or retribution. Lisamarie’s family is torn by the mysterious decision of her grandmother Ma-ma-oo to send her children Trudy and Mick away to residential school rather than deal directly with her abusive husband Ba-ba-oo. Late in the novel, we find that Mick’s dead wife Cookie was killed by FBI agents, who were never formally charged with her murder. Lisamarie is raped by her friend Cheese; he is never punished for his actions. Her friend Pooch commits suicide for mysterious reasons that may or may not stem from sexual abuse at the hands of his mother’s boyfriend “Uncle Josh.” The revelation of Karaoke’s sexual abuse precipitates the avenging murder of Josh by Lisamarie’s brother Jimmy, who also perishes. The novel could be read as a mystery story, in that the narrator/detective Lisamarie gradually discovers skeleton after skeleton in her family closet. Her growing awareness of family dysfunction spurs her to discover the final secret in the novel: the fate of her brother Jimmy.

But Lisamarie is a highly problematic detective and an imperfect moral arbiter. She is consistently characterized as a naïve observer of her family. “God, you can be so dense,” complains her cousin Tab, who accuses Lisamarie of not paying attention (59). She is on the periphery of the relationship between Jimmy and Karaoke, and is surprised to learn of their attraction, let alone of Jimmy’s decision to avenge Karaoke’s abuse. In an earlier text, “Queen of the North,” upon which *Monkey Beach* is based, Karaoke is the narrator, and the reader is made privy to the exact nature of Josh’s abuse from the outset. When asked why she shifted the narrative point-of-view from the character of Karaoke to the character of Lisamarie in her novel, Robinson explained that she wanted to focus the narrative around a character more removed from the central relationship of Jimmy and Karaoke, in order to capitalize upon the ambiguity such a character’s narration would lend to the unfolding of the story (Robinson “Reading”).

Not only is Lisamarie naïve about family relationships; she is also

ignorant of Haisla traditions and knowledge that might serve to orient both her and the reader within the cultural world of the novel:

Six crows sit in our greengage tree. Half-awake, I hear them speak to me in Haisla. *La'es*, they say, *La'es*, *la'es*. I push myself out of bed and go to the open window, but they launch themselves upward, cawing. Morning light slants over the mountains behind the reserve. A breeze coming down the channel makes my curtains flap limply. Ripples sparkle in the shallows as a seal bobs its dark head. *La'es*—go down to the bottom of the ocean. The word means something else, but I can't remember what. (1)

Lisamarie acknowledges that the word *La'es* means “something else” which she has forgotten, an admission all the more troubling because cultural loss is remembered and confessed.⁴ Thus, from the first page, Lisamarie calls into question her own reliability as a “Native informant.” Clearly, Lisamarie is less an engineer than a *bricoleur*, and her journey throughout the novel involves not only the search for truth, but also the investigation of her Haisla heritage to determine to what extent its text is either “coherent or ruined.”⁵

By constructing a narrative point of view which continually manifests its own limitations, Robinson foregrounds the process of trying to understand relations, both causal and cultural. Lisamarie's “gift,” the ability to contact spirits, makes this process especially complex. Her mother, who has suppressed her own occult powers, pronounces her daughter's gift to be “clearly a sign . . . that you need Prozac” (3). Even Ma-ma-oo, Lisamarie's mentor, gives her little concrete guidance. While Ma-ma-oo tells Lisamarie that her visitations from the little red-haired tree spirit might mean “you're going to make canoes,” Ma-ma-oo rejects this hypothesis, advising her granddaughter that “old ways don't matter much now. Just hold you back” (152–3).

If viewed in relation to Lisamarie's desire for self knowledge, her connection to the *b'gwus* is vital and complex. The traditional *b'gwus* narrative, with its connections to “wealth woman” and “land otter woman,” offers Robinson the opportunity to interpolate a traditional Haisla narrative of reward, crime and retribution into the contemporary story of a young Haisla woman's coming-of-age. Yet, if Lisamarie's encounter with the *b'gwus* is meant to imbue her role with traditional Haisla significance, what is it? Since the *b'gwus* can bestow great wealth, act as scourge of the sexually deviant, or drive the witness mad, it isn't at all clear which (if any) meaning is predominant.

For example, is Lisamarie truly a scourge, a judge who metes out just punishment to those who transgress cultural taboos? Many characters in the novel manifest some form of guilt for past actions, but they also appear

to be caught between a desire for judgement and fear of it. One can, like Jimmy and Lisamarie, desire to pass judgment upon those who have committed crimes. But at the same time, one can fear that judgement (cosmic or otherwise) will be passed on oneself, the punishment creating the sense of guilty responsibility that may or may not be warranted by human ethical standards. This ambiguity is nicely illustrated by Ma-ma-oo's story of the death of her sister Eunice (or Mimayus), who fell in love with a boy from Bella Bella (a neighboring tribe, the Heiltsuk). One night, Mimayus traveled by boat to visit her boyfriend, but was caught in a deadly storm. One woman in the lead boat who survived claimed that she saw "a funnel descending from the clouds like a black finger. The sound, [she] said, was like a thousand people screaming" (162). By anthropomorphizing the storm as a crowd seemingly bent on destroying Mimayus, Robinson makes plain the disjunction between the traditional Haisla worldview and the contemporary one. Mimayus's fate-as-punishment precipitates a retroactive search for a crime, such as falling in love with someone "not of her people": an unlikely conclusion given the novel's thoroughly pluralist contemporary context.⁶ The novel is rife with the anxiety born of not being able to reconcile traditional ways with the complexity of modern Haisla life, and the fear of judgement that this failure precipitates. Aunt Edith relates a near drowning episode she experienced with Uncle Mick and Lisamarie's mother, when a rogue wave capsized a punt they were towing:

Mom said that during those few seconds that she was thinking they were goners, she saw porpoises playing around the punt and knew they were going to be all right. But for a moment, she said, the porpoises looked like people, and she screamed. (123)

Halpin argues that the West Coast First Nations' anxiety over the transgression of necessary boundaries between animals and human beings reveals the primal fear of effacing the boundaries between self and Other, leading to possession and loss of self. The *b'gwus*, not quite human, not quite animal, is a stark archetype of this transgression:

When [*b'gwus*] animals imitate humans, they transgress the boundary onto the human side. . . . Persons who have already diminished their humanity or not yet achieved it—children, the drowning, men and woman who break sexual taboos—are subject to the dangerous contagion of their resemblance to animals. Similarities between humans and animals create openings in the separation between their realms through which the superior powers of the non-human can erupt into the precariously structured human order and overwhelm those who have released them. (221–2)

The complexities of the relations between humans and other animals form part of the larger ethical landscape of the novel. Significantly, Robinson places the passage describing the porpoises directly after Lisamarie's observation of her mother and Uncle Mick's transgressive intimacy in the cabin. The conjunction of "the violation of marriage taboos" and Lisamarie's mother's terror at mistaking porpoises for humans illustrates the consistent collision, throughout the novel, of contemporary Haisla characters with traditional Haisla beliefs. In this context, Uncle Mick's grisly death—he is eaten by seals—can be seen as cosmic punishment for the "crime" of loving his sister-in-law, as the "beautiful woman who was having an affair with her husband's brother" is pronounced guilty through her finding "large footprints in the sand" (211).⁷

Although the narrative invites a reading that foregrounds a traditional Haisla ethical system, it does not offer a simplistic interpretation of this system. Lisamarie, the "monster" who has been chosen by the *b'gwus*, seems incapable of understanding the significance of being chosen. Left without a clear ethical or ontological framework, she vacillates between rejection of her gift as "crazy" and headlong exploitation of it, in particular her blood sacrifice to the spirits of the woods, who promise her that "they can hurt him for you" (261). The "him," we assume, is her rapist Cheese, but so many others in the novel might also deserve some "hurt."

The ethical terrain of *b'gwus*, *pa'gwus*, "wealth woman," and "land otter woman" requires innocence, guilt, purity and impurity to be clearly and divinely recognized. When one hears the baby's cry and follows it deeper into the trees, one meets the fate one deserves. But in the contemporary world of murky social values and personal motivations, can such a fate truly be assigned? Lisamarie's role as *b'gwus* is clearly vexed. Her powerful desire to judge those who have wronged both her and her family is countered by the equally powerful fear that such judgements are impossible. She fears, moreover, that adopting this ethical system will mean that she has to judge herself in the same harsh light: Lisamarie struggles with her own responsibility for her misfortunes, especially her rape by Cheese at the drunken house party.

In this way, the *b'gwus* subtext in *Monkey Beach* highlights the desire for and fear of judgement and retribution. Lisamarie's connection to the *b'gwus* indicates her role as (failed) judge (a connection necessarily predicated upon her "purity as a witness"), but it also suggests that Lisamarie's struggle to maintain her sanity is ultimately doomed, because of her inability to resist the "contagion" the *b'gwus* represents. As indicated, *b'gwus* is also connected

to the “land otter woman,” who leaves her crying child afloat in the ocean in order to lure sinful men to their deaths. A passage late in the novel indicates Robinson’s familiarity with this figure. When Lisamarie attempts an “intervention” with her brother Jimmy and takes him to Monkey Beach, she again wakes up alone on the shore. “Something in the water was drifting out with the tide. . . . For a moment, it looked like a baby in a christening outfit. But when I was a few feet from it, it was just a bucket” (356). Jimmy returns to the beach to find his sister “waist deep in the ocean” (356), and he pulls her out just as “something caught [her] ankle . . . and pulled [her] under” (357). This unexplained occurrence indicates that despite Lisamarie’s “gift,” she, too, can fall victim to the spirits of the environment who judge and punish sinners.

Given the strategic ambiguity Robinson maintains throughout the novel whenever traditional Haisla belief is employed, the ending of the novel is apt. Lisamarie is intimately connected with the *b’gwus* she hears at the end of the novel. “Close, very close, a *b’gwus* howls” (374). On one end of the interpretive spectrum, she is hearing herself “howl,” accepting (yet not explicating for herself or the reader) her role in the ethical universe she flounders within. On the other end, she is hearing a howl from a creature who promises ethical certainty, the ability to judge, reward, or punish according to the individual’s true character. Perhaps only through this ethical litmus test—her encounter with the *b’gwus*—can Lisamarie hope to know her own moral quality. However, the most common English translation of *b’gwus* is, according to Dunn, “any animal that can imitate human behaviour with great alacrity and deftness” (Dunn, qtd. in Halpin, 214). By employing a figure from the Haisla tradition whose power resides in its ability to mimic humans, Robinson heightens the sense that the characters are constantly confronted with (and seduced by) distorted reflections of their own desires and fears, their “contagions,” as Halpin terms the threat of becoming an animal. In a larger sense, by problematizing Haisla traditions, or at least making their thoroughgoing application problematic, Robinson demonstrates both the risks of, and the necessity for, cultural *bricolage*.

In describing traditional tribal expression, Lévi-Strauss uses the example of a wood sculptor to illustrate how the contingent affects the execution of the work in “the size or shape of the piece of wood the sculptor lays hands on, in the direction and quality of its grain, in the imperfection of his tools, in the resistance which his materials or project offer to the work in the course of its accomplishment, in the unforeseen incidents arising during

work" (27). This "resistance" is consistently signalled throughout *Monkey Beach* as Lisamarie ultimately fails to incorporate her limited knowledge of Haisla cultural traditions into a coherent program of living. Robinson demonstrates, and exploits, to poignant effect on the level of plot and character development, the desire and fear the contemporary Aboriginal subject experiences as she confronts what she cannot (but feels she must) know. Thus, Lisamarie's ultimate failure to "really" discover the fate of her brother Jimmy on Monkey Beach is also the failure to engineer Haisla culture, to discover its certainty amidst the confusing signs that forestall such a discovery.

Like such other Aboriginal writers as Sherman Alexie, Daniel David Moses, and Thomas King, Robinson organizes her narrative around the search by characters for authentic Aboriginality. Rather than investing traditional cultural information with immanence—what Tiffany Ana Lopez calls in another context "the skeleton key for the cultural insider" (21)—Robinson recognizes with these authors that a hermetic, authentic Aboriginal subjecthood is unattainable. By interpolating traditional materials in a contemporary narrative and by refusing to signal the primacy of either, Robinson succeeds in foregrounding Lévi-Strauss' contingency of execution and the resistance these traditional materials manifest. When this resistance is ignored or mediated by readers, the fundamental suspension of certainty in the text is elided, to misleading effect.

Early on in the novel, the narrator instructs the reader to find a map of British Columbia. Our attention is drawn to the factors that make an accurate map difficult, if not impossible to render: kermode bears which are called black but are really white; territorial disputes between the Tsimshian and Haisla nations; the misnaming of Kitamaat by Hudson's Bay traders, and the co-option of the name Kitimat by Alcan Aluminum workers (4–5). This commentary on maps demonstrates how, as Guillermo Verdecchia puts it, "maps have been of no use because I always forget that they are metaphors and not the territory" (20). Just as the map teases us to conflate the two-dimensional representation with the terrain it covers, Robinson's text tempts us to believe that it "explains" Haisla culture, locating First Nations experience and thus making it knowable. Andrews sees this passage as a detailed and "substantial description" of Kitamaat, which stands in stark contrast to the mystery of Jimmy's disappearance (10–11). I would argue that the contrast is false: like Jimmy's fate, the map is fraught with ambiguity; it reflects Lisamarie's desire to "map" her world and thereby stave off the recognition that such an act, as an assertion of mastery, is always misleading.

The *b'gwus* motif in the novel helps to symbolize the desire for and/or fear of judgement in the ethical universe of the narrative, and to articulate the moral underpinnings of traditional Haisla encounters with the unknown. But it also calls into question the narrator's role in this ethical universe. Anthropologist Victor Turner sees the function of monsters in traditional cultures as twofold: "In a sense, [monsters] have the pedagogical function of stimulating [people's] powers of analysis and revealing to them the building-blocks from which their hitherto taken-for-granted world has been constructed. But in another way they reveal the freedom, the indeterminacy underlying all culturally constructed worlds" (69). While the Haisla beliefs deployed in the text can be seen as helping to articulate a non-Othering indigenous subject position, they also can be seen as problematizing any attempt to understand the novel as an exercise in atavistic "neo-traditionalism." While the *b'gwus* has clear resonance as Lisamarie's cultural and narrative Doppelgänger, it may also reflect the "indeterminacy underlying all culturally constructed worlds," as Turner posits.

As with concepts of "authentic" Aboriginal culture, circumscribed by both fear and desire in dominant discourse, the *b'gwus* invites and ultimately resists imaginative reconstruction. In an extended passage describing the *b'gwus*' own "clans, stories, and wars," Robinson includes details that clearly echo the dominant discourse's construction of North American Aboriginal peoples:

There are rumours that [the *b'gwus*] killed themselves off, fighting over some unfathomable cause. Other reports say they starved to death near the turn of the century, after a decade of horrific winters. A variation of this rumour says that they were infected with TB and smallpox . . . They are no longer sighted, no longer make dashes into villages to carry off women and children, because they avoid disease-ridden humans. (318)

By linking the rumours of the demise of *b'gwus* to the trauma of post-contact Aboriginal histories, Robinson sets up a curious analogy. Are we to see contemporary interest in "authentic" Aboriginal subjectivity and identity as being akin to the interest "Bigfoot hunters" have in tracking the elusive *b'gwus*, tantalized by oversized footprints and anomalous forest spoor? In an early poem entitled "Oratorio for Sasquatch, Man, and Two Androids," Margaret Atwood uses the Sasquatch figure in a similar fashion, as a symbol of the unknowable and as the ultimate Other that is the locus for fear and desire: "I expected always to see it, / the beast no-one acknowledges, / the final mask: the animal / who is a man covered in fur. / It tracks me, it walks

/ at night over the lawn, / in through the neo- / colonial door, over the walls of my room" (14–15). By linking Sasquatch with "neo-colonial" fear and desire, Atwood evocatively refigures post-contact settler engagement with indigenous cultures as a search for (or escape from?) "the final mask." Of course, this shift is not the same as viewing indigenous peoples as "animals." Rather, Atwood suggests that neo-colonialism, with its necessary binary of civilized/savage, is the "door" through which all Others are invited to enter. Thus, Robinson's allusive evocation of Aboriginal history within the rumoured history of the *b'gwus* indicates how the projection of human fears and desires on near-humans replicates the neo-colonial projection of similar fears and desires on Aboriginal peoples. Lisamarie's statement "I felt deeply comforted knowing that magical things were still living in the world" (315–16) articulates a particular kind of self-reflexive ideological irony, since as an "authentic" Haisla woman with spiritual power, she is neo-colonialism's "magical thing."

While Lévi-Strauss distinguishes between the engineer and the *bricoleur*, and Derrida exposes the former as an ontological fiction, Robinson's novel explores the conscious tension between these two models of cultural construction. She narrates the struggle of a cultural *bricoleur* to understand the signs of her traditional culture and thus make conceptual sense of these signs. As *bricoleur*, Lisamarie embraces her Haisla culture as being sign-driven and therefore contingent, but as engineer, she also recognizes her implicit failure to understand her culture conceptually (for both herself and the reader). Robinson's use of the *b'gwus* figure, "the final mask," lures one to interpret the novel "traditionally" but also forces one to acknowledge the uncertainty such an interpretation uncovers. As Lisamarie laments, "I wish the dead would just come out and say what they mean instead of being so passive-aggressive about the whole thing" (17). Robinson's strategic ambiguity allows her to explore aspects of traditional Haisla life without obscuring the ideological drive to engineer culture.

Monkey Beach makes apparent how traditional cultural signs can serve either to orient the Aboriginal subject as engineer of culture, or confirm her alienation as failed *bricoleur*. In her discussion of Lisamarie's personal connection to the Haisla figure T'sonoqua, the basket ogress who tricks and eats unsuspecting humans, Andrews suggests how "Lisamarie's recognition of herself in monstrous terms is a crucial breakthrough for the girl precisely because it links her to her Haisla culture and gives value to her talents in a context that fuses contemporary concerns with long-standing tribal

narratives.” (18). Yet the *b'gwus*—with its connections to neo-colonial co-option, threatened or manifest judgement, contagion, rumour, and mimicry—is a deeply ambivalent figure in the novel, and helps to signify Lisamarie’s abject status as an outsider. This abjection is not simply the result of non-Aboriginal intervention into a cohesive, coherent Haisla community as Andrews might argue. Michael E. Harkin has glossed the Heiltsuk word *pk'ws* (the homologue of *pi'kis* and *pa'gwus*) as “orphan,” “uninitiated,” and “a Sasquatch, that was thought to live in the bush, devoid of culture” (9). He goes on to say that *pk'ws*, when applied to individuals in a traditional Heiltsuk community, signified that “they were excluded from Heiltsuk symbolic life almost completely and so constituted a class of virtual nonpersons” (10). The relation between the Aboriginal subject and the traditional symbolic life of her community is plainly threatened when the Sasquatch interposes. Lisamarie’s connection to the *b'gwus* is less an orientation toward than a profound alienation from what is perceived (rightly or wrongly) to be the truly “authentic” and conceptually coherent Haisla culture. In important ways, the *b'gwus* figure in *Monkey Beach* allows Robinson to embed Haisla cultural material in a contemporary context that resists normative images of Aboriginality. Once exposed, the complex deployment of Haisla traditional spiritual motifs in the novel promises solutions to the mysteries in/of the text, but reveals these solutions to be fundamentally contingent. In this sense, the howl of the *b'gwus*, “close, very close,” calls to us as seductively (and as problematically) as it does to Lisamarie Hill.

NOTES

- 1 I have discussed tactical elision in Aboriginal performance in *Siting the Other: Re-visions of Marginality in Australian and English-Canadian Drama* (2001): 233–246.
- 2 See also Ridington, Sprague, and Suttles in Halpin and Ames.
- 3 While a discussion of the effect of the gender shift from female *p'gwis* to male *b'gwus* is beyond the scope of this paper, I am intrigued by the issue in relation to the discussion at hand. For example, Lisamarie’s own struggle to understand her gendered role in her family and in her community is central to the narrative, and the ambiguous gender of the *b'gwus* figure serves to echo this individual struggle.
- 4 Emmon Bach, author of the *Haisla-English and English-Haisla Dictionary* (in progress), points out that “there have been several spelling systems in use in Kitamaat Village,” rendering Lisamarie’s definition of “*La-es*” even more ambiguous. Bach provides two homologues for “*La-es*”: “*Lah'is*” (to set (sun); sunset; to go on the beach; to go on a wide expanse; to go to the bottom of the ocean), and “*La'aiz*” (go to the bottom of the ocean) (Personal correspondence). The denotative significance of sunset and the beach is

intriguing, since the novel ends with Lisamarie on Monkey Beach at sunset. But the word “La-es” also suggests a potential further linguistic irony. Ma-ma-oo tells Lisamarie that “everything in the land of the dead is backwards” (140). Thus, “la-es” could also be the English word “seal,” which “bobs its dark head” both in this introductory passage and in the final passage of the novel (374).

- 5 In an interview with Paulo DaCosta, Robinson reveals that she herself is a far from fluent Haisla speaker: “[When writing the novel] I . . . learned more Haisla words than I could handle. I was so entranced in learning Haisla it was actually getting in the way of writing the story” (“Interview”). Lisamarie’s struggle to learn her traditional language reflects the author’s own learning process, and reinforces the idea that the novel is not meant to be read as a product of cultural fluency.
- 6 I have called this conclusion unlikely for two reasons: anthropological work on both the Haisla and the Heiltsuk stresses the longstanding acceptance and even encouragement of intermarriage between the neighbouring peoples (Harkin 8; Olson 185); and, more pertinently, Robinson herself is the product of such a union, her father being Heiltsuk and her mother Haisla.
- 7 In a delightful ironic touch, Robinson has Lisamarie’s father, the implied cuckold, wear a Sasquatch mask and chase his children to scare them (9).

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