

Strategic Abjection

Windigo Psychosis and the “Postindian” Subject in Eden Robinson’s “Dogs in Winter”

In *The Postcolonial Aura*, Arif Dirlik takes issue with postcolonialism’s “denial of authenticity” at a time when claims to cultural authenticity are proliferating around the world (220). Dirlik is particularly interested in contemporary indigenist movements which are committed to notions of Native identity as a step towards empowerment. In short, he argues that there are constructive ways of being essentialist (227).

In many instances, the invocation of an essential Native identity involves a form of “self-Orientalization,” that replays the features ascribed to the Others of Eurocentric modernizationism [*sic*]” (224). In some cases, such as Thomas King’s famous evocations of Native stereotypes in *Green Grass, Running Water* and elsewhere, and Drew Hayden Taylor’s comic send-up of similar stereotypes in his “Blues Quartet,” “self-essentialization” (224) is mobilized for strategic purposes as a form of counter-discursive parody. King especially is well known for his images of Native “savagery” that mock dominant images of the Native as alien and abject other.¹

Eden Robinson’s story collection, *Traplines*, and Robinson’s subsequent novel, *Monkey Beach*, are both conspicuously violent. On one level, this pre-occupation with violence represents Robinson’s engagement with the effects of colonization (or colonial attitudes) on Native peoples. Yet Robinson accomplishes this critique in an unusual way. First, she invokes the often negative imagery conventionally associated with Native peoples (hunting, cannibalism, savagery, primitivism, the windigo/sasquatch) and uses it to strategic effect. Second, she frustrates the reader’s desire to interpret her characters on the basis of their ethno-cultural identity. The ambiguity emerging from these mutually contradictory strategies is intentional, and it is central to Robinson’s dislocation of conventional constructs of identity

and abjection. In contrast to Dee Horne's contention that "*Traplines* does not overtly challenge settler images or stereotypes of First Nations" (160), I would argue that it does so in an unprecedented way, enacting this challenge expressly *because* of the derogatory association of criminal and violent behaviour with aboriginal people. Robinson's approach represents one way of meeting Gerald Vizenor's demand to "'re-invent the invention' of 'Indianness'" (Horne 161), or of undertaking what Ward Churchill speaks of as the "negation of the negation" (107). Robinson is at once appropriating and reformulating the discourse of savagery. At the same time, she negates racialized binaries through her own problematization of racial identity in her stories.

In short, her characters "perform" themselves as savage. However, this "savagery" takes a particular form in her work, for the violence is not specifically "native." Rather it is a symptom of the ills of contemporary urban society, a form of Western psychosis that has infected Native peoples in Canada. This is what both Jack Forbes and Deborah Root have identified as the cannibalizing and psychotic "wétiko sickness" that plagues Western society, a condition marked by greed, excessive consumption, violence, and egotism, and which was visited upon Native peoples at the time of colonization, infecting and steadily debilitating their descendants. Forbes and Root both make use of a Native legend concerning the taboo *against* cannibalism (the Ojibway/Cree story of the man-turned-monster, the windigo/wétiko) to assess the malaise of contemporary Western culture.² What is perhaps most significant about the windigo story is the notion of infection, for the human who resorts to cannibalism in a sense becomes infected by bloodlust, and this acquired compulsion to cannibalize makes him/her a windigo. If the story of the windigo was originally intended as an ethical warning against giving in to libidinous impulses, it has also been widely used as a metaphor for the violence of imperialism and the sickness at the heart of the modern capitalist world.³

Robinson's characters thus protest or "talk back" in ways that reflect not only traditional Native culture but also the "wétiko sickness" of contemporary society. In this way her critique of contemporary Native-white relations in Canada extends beyond a clear-cut opposition, an approach that is further complicated by the ambiguity of race in her writings. Numerous critics have pointed out how difficult it is to pinpoint the racial identity of Robinson's characters.⁴ It is therefore no accident that Helen Hoy's chapter on *Traplines* focusses on the question: "How does the Indianness of *Traplines* signify?" (154). Philip Marchand, for example, contends that "Dogs in Winter"

has “nothing to do with Indians.” In an interview with Derrick Penner, Robinson has claimed that she makes the characters’ identity unclear because she does not want to be pigeon-holed as a Native writer, someone who *must* write about Native issues only. The result is that Robinson’s fictions themselves function as a series of traplines, performing “as tricksters which lure [readers] into believing one thing at their own expense” (Davidson et al. 55). Readers, then, are challenged to sort out the racial/cultural identity of her characters and are in a sense led to enact their own colonialist violence on the texts. The experience of reading (and teaching) Robinson’s works thus forces one to engage in processes of abjection and othering.

This racial confusion (and boundary dissolution) is utilized for specific purposes. On the one hand, it suggests that a socio-cultural windigo sickness affects both white and Native communities (something explored in many Native writings, particularly in Lee Maracle’s *Ravensong* and Tomson Highway’s *Kiss of the Fur Queen*). On the other, it dissolves the traditional boundaries between the two groups.⁵ This strategic ambiguity enables Robinson to launch a radical “post-Indian” response to racist stereotypes by complicating the very origins of “savagery” and “primitivism” and by defying the reader to make a definitive identification of the characters (and their author) as either “white” or “Native.” The savagery associated with aboriginal identity becomes transfigured as a result of the contagion of the non-Native world and metamorphoses into a kind of psychosis—specifically, an all-consuming hunger for physical and psychological violence.⁶

Robinson’s work is of particular relevance for critics interested in Native cultural expression and postcolonial conceptions of hybridity, for it complicates Dirlik’s rejection of the anti-essentialist and dehistoricizing implications of hybridity. She wrestles with notions of both hybridity and Native essentialism in a manner that is comparable to Judith Butler’s deconstruction of the binary between constructivism and determinism in accounts of sexual identity (94). Although Robinson’s characters may be performing themselves as Native, it is finally up to the reader to evaluate the authenticity of the performance. Compelled by Robinson’s texts to seek the ab-original in the hybrid, the reader is caught in the imperializing act, so to speak. This strategy dislocates the teleology of essence and origins, without erasing them altogether.

In *Cannibal Culture*, Deborah Root explores the ways contemporary Western society “has aestheticized *wétiko* sickness and we ourselves have become cannibal” (13). According to Diana Brydon, Root’s

notion of “white cannibal culture” shows “non-Indigenous Canadians their own rapacious desire imaged as the consumable other” (53). In her fiction, Robinson makes this re-projection more blatant by showing both Native and non-Native Canadians their “rapacious desire” imaged as a kind of corrupted Native (a version, perhaps, of the Native “going native”). Her characters engage in ritualized performances of savagery, thereby evoking the very qualities that have been inflicted on Native peoples, who for generations have been designated the savage and soulless “Other” (which is also a possible, though not conventional, definition of the psychotic).⁷

In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud gives a disturbingly Eurocentric account of the links between aboriginal (“primitive”) and European (“civilized”) instances of taboo and savagery. Throughout his study, Freud is fascinated with what he deems the “lower” order of Native/savage cultures (75).⁸ For him, the Native itself is taboo. This, of course, was true historically in that the sacred practices of aboriginals were considered unclean and dangerous by Europeans. As Root puts it, “Within Western culture there has been a tendency to project the categories of violence and of bloodthirsty, barbaric religious practices onto colonized people” (9). For Freud, the Native is what stands as the abject for white (“civilized”) society, functioning as that which should remain unconscious, and yet also that with which one is clearly obsessed.⁹

Julia Kristeva develops Freud’s thesis in *Powers of Horror*, where she explores the specific dynamics of abjection. The abject is that which haunts the self by continuously bringing it into crisis—generally in the form of some cast-off part or product of the body (e.g., corpse, animal, flesh, excrement). In a colonial context, the abject becomes metaphorized as the subordinate colonial object that constantly brings the imperial self into question. When the abject assumes a specifically aboriginal form, conjured in the writing of a Native author, one might say that a strategic summoning of abject aboriginality is in operation. Like the abject body that hovers at the borders of civilization and/or subjectivity, aboriginal peoples were seen as both part of and not part of white society (and indeed are often still seen in these terms). In “Dogs in Winter,” one might say that Robinson brings abject aboriginality into the foreground. The racially ambiguous serial killer in this story produces the ultimate abject entity in the form of a corpse or cadaver which propels the “I” (and by extension the civilized social world) into the vortex of abjection (see Kristeva 3–4).

By engaging in this strategic summoning of the abject, Robinson depicts how Native people in Canada were colonized by a system that has historically

designated them as the abject side of the mind/body or self/other binary. We might think of this approach as a variation on strategic essentialism for women: it is a form of strategic savagery for the aboriginal woman. If, as Spivak writes, “the question of the abject is very closely tied to the question of being *ab-original*” (10),¹⁰ Robinson invokes a specifically *aboriginal* version of the abject: she destabilizes conventional racially inflected constructs of abjection, and she utilizes images of savagery often associated with aboriginal “primitivism” to depict the ills of contemporary society.

Robinson’s approach might thus be one way of answering Gerald Vizenor’s call for postindian “simulations of survivance” in contemporary Native cultural expression (5). Vizenor seeks an alternative to both the negative stereotypes and their idealized replacements. As many commentators have noted, the latest shift in configurations of aboriginality is marked by an idealizing of the Native (see Goldie, Tiffin, Torogovnick, Dumont). Robinson launches an effective counter-discursive response through her version of “postindian” parody. By exaggerating Western commodification of Native savagery, she highlights the violent history of Native-white relations, while resisting idealized versions of the Native. Robinson thus directs her message to Natives and non-Natives alike, an approach that is reflected in the racial ambiguity of her characters. The matriarchal serial killer in “Dogs in Winter” prefaces her forays by singing the children’s rhyme “A-Hunting We Will Go.” Yet Robinson’s narratives leave one in doubt, finally, as to who is the hunter and who is the hunted.

Central to Robinson’s method is the way the text lures the reader into premising his/her interpretations on the aboriginal identity of the characters. The story “tricks” the reader into making stereotyped judgements. For instance, the “savage” rituals and criminality engaged in by Lisa’s mother may be read as evidence of her “aboriginal” identity, especially given their association with hunting practices; so, too, can Lisa’s placement in a series of foster homes. Thus, one may be led to interpret the story according to a certain anti-colonial trajectory. The narrator of the story, Lisa, is horrified by her mother and wants to deny all likeness with her. This might be considered a typical response from a colonized subject, for in effect the narrator wants to divorce herself from her ancestry. (She does so, in part, by embracing her foster parents and non-Native friends.) However, this psychological colonization is parodied in that the daughter has legitimate reason to fear her mother, who has embarked on a career as a gleeful (and savage) serial killer. The daughter not only fears for her own life but, more significantly,

also suspects that the same impulses may be germinating within her, thus echoing the early colonizers' notion that savagery was "in the blood."

Nevertheless, Mama's role in the story is not so clear-cut. On the one hand, Lisa implicitly identifies with her mother (and hence is attracted to her), even though she wants to disavow her. On the other hand, Mama and Lisa may not be Native, in which case the apparent colonialist subtext is untenable. The story thus leads the reader through the very misreadings that have historically governed views of Native people, while also demonstrating that such constructions are erected on flimsy and easily manipulated "evidence." Prompting even the well-meaning reader to be racist, the text forces a confrontation with the ambiguity inherent in any colonialist interpretative enterprise.

Lisa's ambivalence about her ancestry further clouds the issue, for she evinces simultaneously an interest in what may or not be her aboriginal heritage and a consuming desire to be accepted in mainstream society. Given the text's strategic vagueness about her Native/non-Native identity, it is not surprising that Robinson erects as Lisa's personal totem the moose, a resonant symbol both for aboriginal and for non-aboriginal Canadians. One of Lisa's formative memories is of a moose-hunting expedition with her mother to celebrate her first menstruation. On an immediate level, the expedition represents a "savage" ritual, with the mother initiating her daughter into the mysteries of adulthood: "Now you're a woman,' [her mother] said. She handed me the heart after she wiped the blood onto my cheeks with her knife. I held it, not knowing what to do. . . . She pried a tooth from the moose and gave it to me. I used to wear it around my neck" (60–61). As a scene of ritualized abjection, the bleeding ritual is inherently ambiguous, yet it forms a central moment in Lisa's self-constitution. It seems "aboriginal," but it also parodies the recreational primitivism usually associated with non-native, homosocial bonding rituals. To read the scene as an "aboriginal" ritual is to fall into Robinson's trap, for it represents an act of ritual savagery whose "aboriginality" is unclear at best. Although the fact that Lisa wears the tooth as an amulet around her neck suggests that initially the hunting experience forged a welcome bond between herself and her mother, Lisa eventually becomes repelled by the savagery of the event. This reaction derives in part from her subsequent experiences of prim civility; Lisa's changed attitude echoes the way that aboriginal traditions and cultural practices were "framed" and demonized by colonizing Europeans.

The reader is finally left uncertain how to interpret this scene. Does the hunt initiate a moment of mother-daughter bonding, or is it an early sign

of windigo blood-lust? Does it indicate Mama's insanity, or do her actions merely appear insane because they are later juxtaposed with the ultra-civility of contemporary middle-class society? "Dogs in Winter" lures the reader into making assumptions about its aboriginal content that are then rejected in the course of the story.

In Lisa's mind the moose-hunting expedition functions as a grotesque foreshadowing of the savagery that is to come. Her repeated revisitation of this event is an index of its importance. If the killing and subsequent mutilation of the moose represent a primal scene of abjection that threatens Lisa's sense of self, it is also symbolic of her own suppression/murder of her ancestry (Native or non-Native). We see this in her recurring dream about the moose-killing. In the dream, it is Lisa who shoots the moose with the encouragement of her mother, thereby making her link with the killer-mother overt. Moreover, she wears a blue dress in the dream as she walks into the lake to retrieve her kill (41), the same dress worn by her mother during her killing sprees. Yet if Lisa becomes her mother in the dream, she also identifies with the moose, whose carcass rises from the water to give her an ambiguous message: "It towers over me, whispering, mud dribbling from its mouth like saliva. I lean toward it, but no matter how hard I try, I can never understand what the moose is saying" (41).

If the moose represents an externalization of Lisa's own feeling of vulnerability at the hands of her mother, it also functions for Lisa as a stand-in for the Freudian lost object, the discarded supplement upon which self-identity is founded, always haunting, always beyond reach. It may also be interpreted in terms of aboriginal identity itself, which is evaded yet summoned in Robinson's manipulation of readers' preconceptions. By abjecting or discarding what society has previously abjected (the aboriginal), Robinson enacts a paradoxical conjuring of the absent aboriginal. In this way, her texts simultaneously conjure and repress, just as her characters are, in a sense, simultaneously Native and non-Native.

The moose thus functions as a crucial symbol in the story. It underscores Lisa's precarious sense of selfhood, acting as the abject body that haunts her. The moose appears again in the painting she buys from an antique dealer when on holiday with her foster parents. Although her foster mother is horrified by the painting, Lisa finds a curious solace in it: "Except for the moose lying on its side, giving birth to a human baby, it's a lovely picture. There are bright red cardinals in the fir trees, and the sun is beaming down on the lake in the left-hand corner. If you squint your eyes and look in the

trees, you can see a woman in a blue dress holding a drawn bow” (58–59). It is not clear whether Lisa is identifying with the woman in the painting or with the moose, the hunter or the hunted, since the two become conflated in the image of the moose giving birth to a human child. The uncertainty of Mama’s influence is indicated by the ghostly Artemis-like figure amongst the trees, an ambivalence that is inherent in the huntress goddess herself—at once a virginal, protective figure embodying the spirit of the wilderness and associated with women, and a heartless (possibly murderous) huntress who seeks here to sunder the child-mother bond. The symbolism of the painting is further complicated by the bow and arrow, which can be read both as a classical motif and as a Native one. The symbolic Native (Mama) functions as the conqueror of the moose/child. According to this picture, the victim (moose) gives birth to the conqueror (human), who is in turn another victim (child).

This complex intertwining of identities has an obvious analogue in the fact that Lisa, apart from her mother, lacks any clear sense of genealogical or cultural roots. She wonders whether she is “savage” or “civilized,” and her Aunt Genna’s account of Lisa’s parentage only clouds the issue. Aunt Genna (before she is murdered by Mama) lies to Lisa about her parents, transforming them into colonizing Westerners: “They are in Africa. . . . They are both doctors and great explorers” (43–44). Genna’s invocation of the civilizing mission of colonialism explicitly endorses a White/Native opposition. Later, Lisa invokes this missionary lineage in response to questions from the mother of her friend Amanda.

Lisa’s uncertain background makes her relation to the moose-hunting scene all the more crucial, for it is the one legacy (and the one “clue” to her identity) left her by her mother. But this legacy is tainted by its associations with a windigo-like cannibalism. Fearing that she may become a cannibalizing murderer as a result of having consumed the moose, Lisa sets out on a desperate bid for self-control by abjecting her mother (and hence the Native “savagery” associated with her) as that which threatens her sense of self. However, since the mother cannot be killed off so easily, Lisa inadvertently turns herself into her mother (and into a symbolic windigo) by attempting to kill herself before her mother can do it, playing the role of both moose and Mama at once (as we saw in both the dream and the painting). Time and again she loses her nerve, only to have her final suicide attempt subverted by the boy who threatens to rape her in the woods. Lisa finally realizes the truth about her ambivalent feelings towards Mama and herself: “I

can't kill, I decided then. . . . I can betray, but I can't kill. Mama would say that betrayal is worse" (67).

Lisa's realization represents a turning point in her growing comprehension of the origins of Mama's violence. If the mother-turned-killer behaves as a voracious and affectless windigo, perhaps this windigo psychosis has emerged from what society has imposed on her. The progression of Mama's killing sprees suggests this interpretation: Mama goes from hunting expeditions that forge an ambiguous bond between her and her daughter, to victimization at the hands of a "sick" society, to actual savagery and bloodlust. The result is a disturbing, self-mutilating, and abject hybrid—a subject who has symbolic ties with traditional Native culture but who has also been tainted by a psychotic society that lacks any healing connection with its past.

Although Lisa fears that she might have become contaminated by her mother's windigo sickness, Mama's "savagery" can be said to have at least two sources. First, she appears to want to forge a bond between Lisa and herself—the menstruation/hunting scene could as easily be read in this light as with the more gruesome slant Lisa puts on it. Second, her acts of violence begin as maternal protectiveness. The first time (outside a hunting context) that Lisa sees her mother kill is therefore significant. Ginger, the vicious pit bull next door, has been trained by its owner to intimidate the neighbourhood children. When the dog lunges to attack Lisa on her return home from school, Mama comes to the rescue:

It was as unreal then as it is now. Mama and Ginger running toward each other. They ran in slow motion, like lovers bounding across a sunlit field. Mama's arm pulled back before they met and years later I would be in art class and see a picture of a peasant woman in a field with a curved knife, a scythe, cutting wheat. . . . Mama slid the knife across Ginger's scalp, lopping off the skin above her eyebrows. Ginger yelped. Mama brought her knife up and down. . . . Up and down. The blood making patterns on her dress like the ink blots on a Rorschach test. (48)

Although Lisa associates the scene with a European prototype, her description suggests something radically other: the stereotyped image of the Native savage, knife held aloft, racing to scalp the enemy white man. Mama becomes the Native savage in order to combat savagery. Her words about the dog's owner are prescient: "Stay away from that man. . . . He's crazy" (47).

Mama's first human kill, the murder of her husband, also appears to have been undertaken in order to protect her daughter. Once again, she makes use of her skills as a hunter, foiling any attempts to identify her victims by preparing them like slaughtered animals and removing their heads and feet:

For a moment, the skinned carcasses inside the freezer looked to [the policeman] like deer or calves. Then he saw arms and legs, sealed in extra-large plastic bags piled high. . . . The bodies were identified only with difficulty, as they had no heads or fingers. . . . The easiest to identify was David Jonah Rutford, Moreen's husband, who was missing only his heart (69).

The link between the missing heart and the moose-killing scene is immediately apparent. It is further established through the man's name, Rutford, which echoes Lisa's earlier description of the male moose during "rutting season": "During rutting season, her mate, the bull moose, is one of the most dangerous animals, frenzied enough to inflict death or dismemberment on those who stand between him and her and incapable of distinguishing between friend and enemy" (49). If Rutford was Mama's first human victim, he may have been killed in self-defence. However, Mama seems to have been infected with Rutford's windigo blood-lust, especially the urge "to inflict death or dismemberment," for the list of her victims reveals the haphazard nature of her subsequent attacks: two are women; one is elderly; two are homeless (67). The text plays with the reader just as Mama plays with Lisa, for we are never sure whether or not she actually intends to kill her daughter. Mama, it appears, has metamorphosed from traditional hunter and protector into psychotic windigo.

Ultimately, "Dogs in Winter" leaves the reader uncertain of how to assess Lisa's mother. Has she become what she is through her own experience of victimization, and does that victimization carry ethnic or cultural implications? Does she initially embark on the killings in order to protect her daughter? Or is she simply a murderer? What is one to make of the fact that Lisa betrays her mother twice: once when she is a little girl and she directs the policeman to the freezer in the basement; and again, years later, when she hands a photo of her mother, now escaped from prison, to the police? In the end, is it possible that Lisa is the heartless savage, the one who has turned her back on her relations ("I can betray, but I can't kill")? Robinson doesn't allow any easy answers to these questions, suggesting that the spirit of the cannibalizing windigo has infected all segments of society: daughter and mother, white and Native.

"Dogs in Winter" (like the other stories in *Traplins*) does not offer a conventional postcolonial vision of Native-white relations; instead, this story presents a problematic postindian consciousness.¹¹ In this context, the prefix "post" signifies not a superseding of "indian" but an incorporation and modification. Perhaps Mama is a "postindian" subject, for she is aligned

with certain “signs” of aboriginality that in this story are subjected to a process of resignification. By engaging in strategic ambiguity, Robinson forces us to confront our own urge to colonize aboriginal texts.

Helen Hoy is right to suggest that Robinson “rewrites the texts that formulate her” (181). In her fiction, the abject Native confronts the culture that gave it being, offering a reminder of white society’s historical complicity in the abjecting of the Native. In this way the abjected aboriginal returns as a haunting reminder of white society’s inherent savagery and its historical complicity in the dispossession of Native peoples. Perhaps it takes the stereotyped savage—the hunter, the psychotic—to uncover the more pervasive savagery that lurks beneath the veneer of civilized society. Paradoxically, in “Dogs in Winter” it is a serial killer, colonialism’s returned repressed, who comes to assume an ethical/superego function, acting as an unsettling reminder of the crimes of the past.¹²

NOTES

- 1 See, for instance, King’s parodic *Dead Dog Café* (both the CBC Radio program and the restaurant in *Green Grass, Running Water*) where Native characters consciously use stereotypes of aboriginal naiveté and savagery to dupe gullible customers (restaurant patrons, radio listeners, etc.). Davidson et al. also explore King’s parodic method in his photographs of Native artists.
- 2 The Windigo is a cannibalistic monster of the Algonquian group. The term derives from the Algonquian root word “witiku,” although the Ojibway spelling is usually “windigo” and the Cree, “wétiko.” Although Forbes and Root use the phrase “wétiko sickness,” I am writing it as *windigo* throughout simply because this is the more familiar spelling of the word. The term is not a proper noun per se. In a general sense the windigo is a human who has been corrupted, usually as a result of an act of cannibalism (early accounts by Samuel Hearne and David Thompson describe the windigo in this context), and who in turn becomes a cannibalizing monster that stalks humans. The emotionlessness of the windigo—it is usually associated with winter and is said to have a heart of ice—makes it an ideal metaphor for what we today might describe as psychosis, and it is certainly best thought of as a monstrous spirit that can take possession of and live inside humankind. In the context of this essay, the windigo can be construed as an embodiment of the greed of contemporary consumer culture and as a type of serial killer.
- 3 There have been a number of contemporary “rewrites” of the windigo story. See, for instance, Wayland Drew’s *The Wabeno Feast* and Ann Tracy’s *Winter Hunger*. Margaret Atwood’s essay in *Strange Things*, “Eyes of Blood, Heart of Ice,” undertakes an extended discussion of modern Canadian reworkings of the windigo story. See also Tomson Highway’s *Kiss of the Fur Queen* in which both the Natives and whites behave as windigos. A central motif in Robinson’s *Monkey Beach* is the related figure of the B’gwus or Sasquatch, though its role in this text is far different from the windigo metaphor of “Dogs in Winter.” In *Monkey Beach*, the B’gwus may be seen as an ambiguous psychic projection of the main character, Lisamarie Hill: on the one hand it functions as a sort of

- Lacanian *objet petit a* (an unattainable metaphysical absence); on the other, it embodies a Real presence (an objective correlative for a cultural-historical reality). The text treads a fine line, never quite clarifying the role (or ontological status) of the B'gwus.
- 4 See Hoy for a survey of some of the early reviews of *Traplines* and the question of racial identity in the stories (153–54, 226). There are enough details in the text to support an interpretation of Lisa and Mama as aboriginal, and of course Robinson's aboriginal ancestry, combined with the subject matter of her other writings, cannot help but influence one's interpretation. When an aboriginal author uses motifs of savagery, they carry extra cultural weight. In a sense, Robinson is able to have it both ways: her characters may be read as aboriginals who are striking back at a society that has persistently marginalized them, while her text is also tongue-in-cheek in its evocation of stereotypes of aboriginality. Whether or not the characters in "Dogs in Winter" are identified as Native, I am arguing that Robinson is appropriating the terms of "savagery" conventionally assigned to Native peoples and reworking them here.
 - 5 This conflation is, of course, emblemized in the title of the collection. On the one hand the title refers to the traditional traplines that historically belong to particular aboriginal families; on the other, it conveys a sense of generalized societal and/or psychological entrapment (for both whites and Natives). Additionally, it might be read self-reflexively, to allude to the reader's entrapment by the "lines" of the text, particularly vis-à-vis the racial/cultural ambiguity of Robinson's characters.
 - 6 The psychotic nature of Robinson's characters has been identified by critics as a defining quality of her fictional worlds. James Marcus, writing in the *New York Times*, celebrates Robinson for demonstrating that Canadians have "psychos" too. Robinson herself has called her characters "flamboyant psychopaths" (qtd. in Hoy 175). All of this is true, and yet Robinson's methods are more profound than a mere revelling in the contemporary fascination with psychotics and serial killers.
 - 7 According to Freudian psychoanalysis, psychosis is a disturbance of the ego's relation to reality and external objects. This is what lends to the psychotic a soulless or affectless quality. The height of "savagery" is perhaps characterized by this lack of emotion, or by the demonstration of inappropriate emotions, such as is evident when Mama, in "Dogs in Winter," cheerfully undertakes her murders. See also Seltzer for an extended account of the psychopathology of serial killers.
 - 8 A dependence on the stereotype of the Native savage is central to the civilizing rationale of Western imperialism. As Dickason notes, "By classifying Amerindians as savages, Europeans were able to create the ideology that helped to make it possible to launch one of the great movements in the history of western civilization: the colonization of overseas empires" (xiii). It is telling that Freud's genealogy traces certain unconscious impulses to a racial inheritance, and does so via an analogy with the supposed atavistic remnants of primitive societies in his day. While Freud is interested in pursuing the "savage" origins of human civilization, especially vis-à-vis the murder and consumption of the father by the sons in the "primal horde," the cultures that he chooses for his case study of primitivism are aboriginal peoples of Australia and North America. Freud's obsession with savagery, as evidenced throughout *Totem and Taboo*, tells us something about the West's ambivalence about its own inherent violence.
 - 9 See Marianna Torgovnick's related study of the modern obsession with the primitive/native in *Gone Primitive*. Her analysis of Western "primitivist discourse" (8) engages with the "impossible necessity" (Goldie 6) of establishing boundaries: "What's 'primitive,' what's 'modern'? What's 'savage,' what's 'civilized'? Increasingly it becomes difficult to tell" (Torgovnick 37–38).

- 10 That is, *from the original*, with the double meaning of *emerging from* and a *distortion of*. It is for this reason that Spivak sees the notion of ab-originality as involving a “reinscription of the subject” and not the object, a statement which certainly holds true in the history of Euro-American constructions of the Native. The notion of ab-originality, therefore, echoes the integral ambivalence that Freud notes in the etymology of the uncanny and taboo.
- 11 This is slightly different from, though not unrelated to, Vizenor’s definition of the postindian. For Vizenor, the postindian is marked by “the absence of the invention” (11) that has long plagued the representation of aboriginals in North America. However, like Robinson, the Native writers Vizenor celebrates “create a new tribal presence in stories” (12).
- 12 This echoes what Jennifer Andrews observes of the ways *Monkey Beach* invites readers to wrestle with their presumptions about the origins of evil; she notes how the novel utilizes gothic conventions to overturn conventional notions of Native “monstrosity.”

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