

The Pedagogy of the Sasquatch: Imagining the Aboriginal without Feathers in Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach*

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Abstract

This paper analyzes Canada's foundational myths of Nature and Natives vis-à-vis recent negotiations of that same relationship by Aboriginal writers, and will offer a reading of Eden Robinson's novel *Monkey Beach* (2000) as paradigmatic of those changes. This novel, I will argue, exposes the contradictions of a colonial discourse that has produced visions of the natural/native space as void of meaning, as claustrophobic, and as filled with unknown threats (the famous "garrison mentality"). By focusing on the culture-specific figure of the Sasquatch, Robinson's text incorporates and analyzes those colonial notions side by side Aboriginal beliefs of the mythic and the supernatural. In the process, new meanings of nature and aboriginality will come about that contest those previously thought of as traditional or representative of the national ethos. At the same, I will try to show how the novel manages to avoid the common practices of stereotyping and/or essentializing aboriginality.

It is well-known that European explorers and settlers never felt indifferent towards the richness of the Canadian landscape, and their perspectives on the vast, wild and unknown expanses they confronted created the bases for a national nature-based mythology very much in place until well past the mid-twentieth century. With time, we have come to know how the colonial configurations of the territory worked on a tacit association between the Land and its aboriginal inhabitants, the written records of the period often interspersing descriptions of the landscape with (pseudo)anthropological accounts of the Native way of life, dress, diet, and customs. In this scheme, both the Natives and the Land were perceived first as empty space (to be occupied), and then as

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commodity or resource (to be exploited) (Francis, 1992). Moreover, parallel to a notion of wilderness as something that must be conquered and transformed, there was a shift, central to the colonialist project, in the approach to the landscape from space (empty container) to place (space that has been encoded with cultural meanings) (New, 1997).

Today, and as a result of the decolonization processes that began to take place in the second part of the twentieth century, Aboriginal writers and artists of Canada are addressing, discussing and often undermining those associations in their works, articulating, instead, perspectives on culture and the environment that may differ as much from the previous colonial ones as from one another. Sometimes, their texts may bring about a harmonious relationship to the Canadian landscape, openly contesting the colonial fear of the bush (Frye, 1965). Sometimes, they choose to exploit the Gothic possibilities of their own mythologies, refusing, in this case, the essentializing drive towards the “Natural Native”.

This paper is part of a work in progress in which I am looking at Canada’s foundational myths of “Nature” and “Natives” vis-à-vis recent negotiations of that same relationship by Aboriginal writers, and will offer a reading of Eden Robinson’s novel *Monkey Beach* (2000) as paradigmatic of those changes. This novel, I will argue, exposes the contradictions of a colonial discourse that has produced visions of the natural/native space as void of meaning, as claustrophobic, and as filled with unknown threats (the famous “garrison mentality”). By focusing on the culture-specific figure of the Sasquatch, Robinson’s text incorporates and analyzes those colonial notions side by side Aboriginal beliefs of the mythic and the supernatural. In the process, new meanings of nature and aboriginality will come about that contest those previously thought of as traditional or representative of the national ethos. At the same, I will try to show how the novel manages to avoid the common practices of stereotyping and/or essentializing aboriginality.

Let us briefly look at how *Monkey Beach* implicitly confronts both established meanings of aboriginality and their accompanying plot structures. As Margery Fee (1989: 16) has shown, the native figure is invariably represented, in white English Canadian literature, as origin (as primitive and hence closer to nature, as noble savage), and as other (hence as object of desire). The typical plot, accordingly, would have a

white protagonist in crisis or confused about his/her past who comes into contact with a native person, with whom s/he ends up identifying, and thereby solving his/her identity conflicts in a psychological/spiritual breakthrough. Variations of this plot design abound in classic Canadian works:

This pattern may be so ubiquitous because it allows for the fulfillment of several ideological functions simultaneously. First, it focuses on the identity quest of the bourgeois individual so crucial to western literature. It allows, through the white character's association with the Native, for a white "literary land claim," analogous to the historical territorial takeover, usually implicit or explicit in the text. And it allows for a therapeutic meditation on the evil of technology and the good of a life close to nature, the latter offering a temporary inoculation against the former. (Fee, 1987: 17)

Monkey Beach addresses this pattern and subverts it by self-consciously introducing some crucial changes.¹ In the first place, we have a Native Canadian protagonist, the Haisla Lisa, in search of her own identity in the midst of diverse forms of cultural colonizations. Secondly, there is the attempt at repossessing through language the land of the Haisla people, at giving a language to the lost land, at landing, rerooting or repossessing the lost language/land. Finally, the required contact with nature is ambiguously represented, as Lisa's description switches back and forth between the ideal and the coopted. Paradigm of such undecisiveness, the figure of the *b'gwus* or Sasquatch is the object of both spiritual/mythical significance and commercial profit, since "[h]is 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" (Robinson, 2000: 317).

Indeed, as Rob Appleforth (2005: 87-88) suggests, the sasquatch is the ultimate paradigm of ambiguity in the text, functioning

¹ Coral Ann Howells (2003: 187) even suggests that Robinson's novel can be read in dialogue with Atwood's *Surfacing*, in their representation of the Canadian wilderness, their use of Native symbols and their (re)contextualization of the visionary quest.

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as a strategic element “to unify the novel around the theme of judgment and retribution, and to foreground the fundamental anxiety over the inscription of Haisla cultural values within the text.” That is so because of the b’gwus being both “a ubiquitous presence in West Coast First Nations mythology and a co-opted sign in settler culture” (88). It is both a sign of popular North American culture and a figure of mythical and spiritual significance for Aboriginals, and this central ambiguity is incorporated and exploited in the text, as we will see, to its very limit.

To begin with, that the b’gwus invariably fails to meet the characters’ and readers’ expectations could be symptomatic of a failure to perform as Aboriginal subject, and thus appears connected to the narrator’s own failure to interpret the signs of her culture: the protagonist is not familiar with Haisla traditional knowledge or even the language (much of the novel’s movement is her own journey into the culture she had forgotten), and when she asks her mother or grandmother, they disown their tradition, refuse or are unable to give her information or guidance in the culture maze: “All the people knew the old ways are gone,” the grandmother tells a thoroughly disappointed Lisa, “[...] Best not to deal at all if you don’t know what you’re doing. It’s like oxasuli. Tricky stuff” (154). Lisa thereby doubts and fails to interpret the significance of her powers, with which their cultural significance, if any, is lost:

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. (Appleforth, 2005: 96)

Significantly staged against the futile search for her brother, disappeared on a fishing trip in the Northern Pacific Ocean, the failure of Lisa’s spiritual search is hinted at early in the novel, when, drawing

on a map of the area for the reader's information, her directions appear extremely confusing, the documentary information offered inexact, the attempt at self-location thwarted by the presence of historical inaccuracies of boundary lines, place names and peoples names. In that context of inaccuracy, the mention of the brother's disappearance that closes the paragraph seems to confirm the failure of the map as guide across the Haisla territory (both for readers and characters): "At the end of the village is our house. Our kitchen looks out onto the water. Somewhere in the seas between here and Namu—a six-hour boat ride south of Kitamaat—my brother is lost" (Robinson, 2000: 5).

On the larger scale, Robinson's novel provides a striking example of the consequences of the contemporary loss of a sense of grounding in Aboriginal communities. This sense of loss is especially evident in the text's exploration of the meaning of family and kinship. As Thomas King has underlined in *All My Relations* (1990), the grasp of relatedness in Native North American cultures usually reaches much further than it is implied in a literal sense,

the web of kinship extending to animals, to the birds, to the fish, to the plants, to all the animate and inanimate forms that can be seen or imagined. More than that, 'all my relations' is an encouragement for us to accept the responsibilities we have within this universal family by living our lives in a harmonious and moral manner (a common admonishment is to say of someone that they act as if they have no relations). (King, 1990: ix)

Given this profound perception of connection among humans, animals, nature, and spirits, it is no wonder that the contemporary westernization of Native family life, their forced conversion to capitalist consumerism, including the commodification of their own identities have produced a schizophrenic culture (Willmott, 2002). In *Monkey Beach*, the narrator's attempt at understanding what the crows say in Haisla (*la'es*) is met by the mother's dry remark that she needs prozac (3). Everywhere, the characters live a somatic exile, expressed in the westernization of ways and in the increasingly consumerist life-style in the village: "Ma-ma-oo never locked her doors, reasoning that she had

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nothing anyone would really want. I think it was because no one she knew had ever locked their doors and doing it seemed rude. We always locked our doors because once someone had broken into our house and taken our videos, video player and TV” (Robinson, 2000: 75).

Enmeshing figurative and literal meanings, the narrator’s attempt at regrounding her cultural identity runs parallel to her effort to remember the land that has been dis(re)membered. Her narrative of regression acts as testimony of the spiritual exile of aboriginal peoples, for whom “[p]lace, land, home are often the same as they were before contact or invasion, but irrevocably different” (Perreault, 1999: 255). That the novel is titled after a place name, Monkey Beach, “a reputed sasquatch hang out,” seems no coincidence in this context, since it refers to the place of the narrator’s childhood, always enveloped by a veil of nostalgia. Monkey Beach is the lost origin, the initial moment that needs to be revisited, for Lisa thinks that by returning physically there, she will be given the answer to both the disappearance of her brother and her own identity search. However, neither plot materializes at the end, the much expected and sought-after Sasquatch never turns up, and nature fails to produce any meaningful signs. Hence the extremely ambiguous ending: Lisa lies in the sand of Monkey Beach between life and death, while a dream-like hearing of the unattainable Sasquatch’s mythical howl is interrupted by the sharp sound of a speedboat (374).

The threat of meaninglessness is a strong possibility in the novel, especially when it comes to the difficult project of representing Aboriginal Culture between cooption and essentialization. On the one hand, many argue, there is an historical need to use self-essentializing strategies. Cynthia Sugars asserts, for instance, that characters in “Dogs in Winter,” a short story in Robinson’s collection *Traplins*, tend to perform as Natives, as savage, primitive, and violent images of themselves in order to represent and denounce “wétiko sickness”, “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” (2004: 79). In *Monkey Beach*, the wétiko sickness is also connected, as we have seen, to the malaise of the capitalist system, and its disturbing effects are graphically expressed, once more, through the figure of the

missing Sasquatch, whose very absence from the story explicitly marks the trauma of post-contact aboriginal cultures:

Most sightings of this shy creature are of single males, but B'gwus is part of a larger social complex, complete with its own clans, stories and wars. There are rumours that they 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, but managed to survive by leaving the victims to die in the woods. They are no longer sighted, no longer make dashes into villages to carry off women and children, because they avoid disease-ridden humans. (Robinson, 2000: 318)

Monkey Beach succeeds in denouncing the intergenerational dimension of colonization, drawing the reader's attention to the complex problems derived from what has been called Historic Trauma Transmission (Visvis, 2004: 42). Yet, on the other hand, I would argue the novel avoids the discourse of self-victimization often attached to narratives of trauma, and this it achieves through the use of "postindian parody" (Sugars, 2004: 82), an alternative view of the aboriginal subject, neither as coopted nor enshrined "as a transcendental truth" (Appleforth, 2005: 85).² Self-parody and jokes are in fact Robinson's territory in the midst of violence, alcoholism, acculturation and a terrible loss of grounding. They serve a subversive function as they smooth out the cacophonous clash of worlds, as symbolized, for instance, in the initial juxtaposition between the speaking crows outside Lisa's window and the tacky Elvis clock on her nightstand: "The Elvis clock says the time is seven-thirty, but it's always either an hour ahead or an hour behind. We always joke it's on Indian time" (Robinson, 2000: 2). Similarly, the threat of cultural extinction as figured through the elusive Sasquatch is parodically undercut by its virtual (albeit false or inexact) location, the narrator tells us, at www.sasquatch.com.

² The term 'postindian' was coined by Gerald Vizenor (1994) to express the possibility of escaping both the stereotypical and the idealized representations of Indian identity.

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Recent literature by Aboriginal writers tells us it is time to reconsider the nation's foundational myths and their derived racial constructions. "[A]s our literature now stands," writes Laura Groening (2004: 27) in this context, "it is to First Nations writing that we must turn if we wish to find an alterNative to the stereotypical images of Aboriginal people that dominate Euro-Canadian literature." Robinson's text marks a direction on the road of imagining both Aboriginality and Canadianness otherwise. And, in that sense, the figure of the Sasquatch, with its central ambiguity and its webpage, achieves a pedagogical function in the text, stimulating our critical capacity to see beyond both stereotype and essentialization, and revealing, at the same time, the incredible "freedom, the indeterminacy underlying all culturally constructed worlds" (Turner, 1977: 97).

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