

TOWARDS A RECOGNITION OF BEING:
TOMSON HIGHWAY'S *KISS OF THE FUR QUEEN*
AND EDEN ROBINSON'S *MONKEY BEACH*

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ABSTRACT

This essay concerns two recent novels by Canadian Aboriginal writers, Tomson Highway, Canada's best known Native playwright, and Eden Robinson, a young writer from British Columbia. These novels are discussed as hybridised texts, working across dislocations between Native cultures and white literary education and white fictional models. Both novelists are engaged in complex cross-cultural translation exercises, and the discussion focuses on adapting European genres for Aboriginal writers' own purposes to reclaim Native cultural inheritances and to reconstruct Native identities. I am arguing for quality in conventional white literary terms (of which both writers are very conscious), while speaking about social inequality, and making a case for equality in the recognition of Aboriginal peoples within contemporary Canadian cultural and national discourse.

KEY WORDS: Canadian Aboriginal writers, Tomson Highway, Eden Robinson, hybridised texts, cross-cultural translation.

RESUMEN

Este ensayo realiza un análisis de dos novelas recientes de autores nativos canadienses, Tomson Highway, el dramaturgo nativo más conocido en Canadá, y Eden Robinson, una joven escritora de British Columbia. Se analizan las novelas como textos híbridos que operan en la dislocación entre las culturas nativas y la educación y los modelos literarios blancos. Ambos novelistas realizan complejos ejercicios de traducción transcultural, y el análisis se centra en cómo usan los géneros europeos para conseguir sus propios objetivos, para reivindicar una tradición cultural propia y reconstruir la identidad nativa. El ensayo reconoce la calidad y el valor de los términos literarios convencionales blancos (de los que los autores son muy conscientes), a la vez que subraya su potencial como crítica social y aboga por un reconocimiento de las culturas aborígenes en el discurso canadiense cultural y nacional.

PALABRAS CLAVE: escritores nativos canadienses, Tomson Highway, Eden Robinson, textos híbridos, traducción transcultural.



Concepts of identity and their representations in literary texts are of crucial importance for First Nations writers in contemporary Canada, for they are engaged in the double process of refiguring Aboriginal identities while at the same time educating readers within and outside Native communities by rehabilitating Native traditions for indigenous readers and interpreting those traditions for non-Natives. A Native person writing in English may find him/herself in an ambiguous position, addressing two different readerships (Native and white), while those readers may be assumed to occupy a wide range of positions *vis-à-vis* cultural and racial difference and to have a variety of frames of reference through which to read the text. A further factor to consider is that these writers themselves with their white education are facing both ways, seeing their Native communities and the majority white society from both inside and outside. Such positioning makes for a problematics of location and a kind of cultural nomadism, where the writer has to face the challenge of constructing—or reconstructing—contemporary Native identities through narratives which both acknowledge and refigure the conventions of European literary genres while not erasing signs of Native difference.

In this essay I shall discuss how this challenge is being met in two recent novels by writers who identify themselves as Native Persons and who have entered the literary mainstream by writing in English and publishing with multinational presses like Doubleday and Alfred Knopf. *Kiss of the Fur Queen* (1998) is the first novel by Tomson Highway, Canada's best known Native playwright, who belongs to the Cree nation, while *Monkey Beach* (2000) is the first novel by Eden Robinson, a young woman writer belonging to the Haisla nation in British Columbia. Highway and Robinson, brought up in Aboriginal communities and educated in white Canadian institutions, are engaged in a complex translation exercise, which is characteristic of 'New' literatures in English, negotiating "a cross-cultural space for survival and the articulation of cultural difference" (Nasta 10). I have taken my title from a new book by Canadian Cree-Metis sociologist Kim Anderson who is engaged in a somewhat similar project to Highway and Robinson for, brought up in Ottawa, she writes about her quest to reclaim the Native part of her identity in a contemporary urban context. I have added the word 'towards' to indicate that such recognition is still an ongoing process in Canada, where there is as yet no stable terminology to describe indigenous people: the official language varies between the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples and the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs; the most commonly used terms are Native and Aboriginal, while Highway also describes himself as Indian (the colonial word) and as Cree. Many Native persons describe themselves as belonging to their own nation, for instance, Haisla or Inuit, where the emphasis falls on pluralism as the politicised term First Nations suggests. At the outset it is worth saying that the identities of Aboriginal Canadians are in the process of construction/ reconstruction within a revised discourse of Canadian nationhood.

Such namings code in the history of Aboriginal peoples, and both Highway and Robinson are engaged in writing and rewriting Canadian history across generations, telling the story of European colonisation and its disastrous consequences from the viewpoint of the Natives themselves, reconstructing the inevitably hybrid-

ised identities of contemporary First Nations people and negotiating a position from which to speak of difference in identity. After all, cultural identities are imbricated with history and historical processes in the past and in the present, as postcolonial theorists like Homi Bhabha and Stuart Hall, and Aboriginal writers like Thomas King, Emma La Roque and Lee Maracle remind us. As Hall explains in relation to black diasporic Caribbean identities: “Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories, but like everything else which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous play of history, culture and power” (Hall 394).

From this perspective, Aboriginal cultural identities in the postcolonial world may be seen as destabilised, internally conflictual, contingent on circumstances. In Hall’s phrase, identity is a “production, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside representation” (392). Such a view, which problematises authenticity, is shared by Highway and Robinson, neither of whom has a fundamentalist belief in an essential Aboriginal identity which denies historical realities. Instead, they share a quality of double vision, embedded as their imaginations are in their Native heritage of myths and cultural traditions but also distanced from those by their white English Canadian education. (Highway, who trained as a classical pianist and studied in London, England, has university degrees in Music and English from the universities of Manitoba and Western Ontario; Robinson has a Master’s degree in Creative Writing from the University of British Columbia and has worked as an assistant on Native art projects at the British Columbia Museum of Anthropology.) As a result, their novels are striking examples of hybridised texts, where different cultural systems of representation are held together in tension. Yet the deep structures of both novels are the same as the protagonists engage in spiritual quests to move beyond loss and damage inflicted on their Native cultures into positions of creative survival in contemporary urban Canada. Significantly, both novels have visionary endings which celebrate Native spiritual healing, asserting, I believe, the magical powers of storytelling.

Just as these writers are working across cultural and linguistic borders in their quests to reconstruct Native identity, so outside readers who are neither Canadian nor Native are also engaged on a quest, learning to recognise different ways of apprehending the world. The challenge for white readers is, how do we read these texts so that we don’t totally misunderstand and misrepresent their meanings? This is an ethical question which involves cultural as well as aesthetic sensitivity and one of which critics have become increasingly aware since the debates in the late 1980s and 1990s over appropriation of voice (see Hunter 142–63; also Hulan 219–23). In fact a similar sensibility is required when approaching any texts written in the ‘New’ Literatures in English, and any other minority group literature being produced in Canada, for all these texts are sites of translation across cultural gaps. Perhaps the most vigorous statement by a white critic about the necessity of adopting a more synthetic approach to reading beyond conventional literary parameters was made by the American critic Arnold Krupat in the Introduction to his groundbreaking anthology of Native American literary criticism in 1993: “One cannot decently attend to the ‘meaning and function’ of song or story without also attending to the





situation of the singer or storyteller, his or her existence not just as an artist, an informant, or a culture-bearer, but as a person enmeshed in the usual day-to-day social needs and relations —needs and relations that for Native Americans are both like and unlike those of other Americans” (Krupat XXI).

As a non-Native, non-Canadian reader, I have found Kim Anderson’s comments on ‘reader response-ability’ particularly clarifying in making me more sensitive not only to the texts but to my own readerly assumptions: “What is your ability to respond to literature written about (and by) Native women? What kind of education and experience do you bring to this text?... I would not ask that anyone suspend their own frame of reference. I merely caution readers to acknowledge their personal abilities to respond” (Anderson 49-51).

I believe that readers have to work from what we are familiar with in regard to literary forms and storytelling codes, moving into these hybridised texts while paying close attention to their signs of difference and to the advice which the writers give us, because they are very aware that their texts occupy a border zone between cultures. Both Highway and Robinson strive to make their texts accessible to Western readers, as they work to establish an appropriate context for the reception of their stories. At best we can only read provisionally, letting ourselves be guided into new ways of seeing the relationship between subject, object and the nature of reality. Margaret Atwood recently gave some advice on ways of reading ‘new’ texts which seems worth quoting: “To lend support to an emerging literature does not mean that you have to silence yourself... The best thing you can do for a writer from a group in the process of finding its voices is to form part of a receptive climate. That is, *buy the work and read it*, as intelligently and sensitively as you can” (Atwood, “If You Can’t” 27).

Both these novels open a way of access to Western readers by adopting familiar narrative genres. *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, set in Canada between the 1950s and late 1980s, reads like a Cree version of James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, for Highway takes the artist novel as the literary form through which to explore the lives of two Cree brothers from northwestern Manitoba who grow up to become performance artists in the world of white urban culture. These dramatic transitions are used to explore the traumatic changes in cultural identities of First Nations people in the late twentieth century.¹ On the other hand, *Monkey Beach* set in the Haisla village of Kitamaat on the densely forested northwest coast of British Columbia, adopts the traditional narrative form of a quest. The quest pattern is a staple feature of mythological narratives across cultures, though Robinson’s story of a journey made by a late twentieth century female protagonist through a haunted wilderness into visionary territory in an underwater world may remind many read-

¹ Mark Shackleton also identifies strong intertextual connections with Joyce’s novel (“Echoes”).

ers of the narrative pattern of Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*. Indeed, Atwood's novel might provide a way of access to *Monkey Beach*, for Robinson as a Native storyteller recontextualises the visionary quest and may be seen to answer some of the questions raised in *Surfacing* about the unknown Amerindian gods who make the wilderness place sacred. Both Highway and Robinson are very self-conscious about their historical moment and their dual relationship to Native and white literary traditions. Highway makes explicit reference to Joyce when his protagonist is trying to write a play called *Ulysses Thunderchild*: "If James Joyce can do 'one day in the life of an Irishman in Dublin, 1903' why can't I do 'one day in the life of a Cree man in Toronto, 1984?'" (*Kiss* 277). Robinson does not refer to *Surfacing*; she does not need to, though her text might be read in dialogue with that novel. However, Lisa Marie her teenage protagonist comments on the way she uses the Native myth of T'Sonaqua, the Wild Woman of the Woods, for a project at her English-speaking high school: "I pieced together three of her stories for the final English essay of the year. I had to modernize a myth by analyzing it and then comparing it with someone real, and had got as far as comparing her with Screwy Ruby" (Robinson 337). This narrative self-consciousness which emphasises the survival of Native legends, now transformed from the traditions of oral storytelling and reanimated within Western literary forms, is paralleled in Highway's highly successful plays, *The Rez Sisters* (1986) and *Dry Lips Outgha Move to Kapuskasing* (1989). Robinson carries the updating of mythic figures one stage further, for her sasquatch, Wild Man of the Woods, even has his own website: 'www.sasquatch.com' (Robinson 317).

These writers range eclectically across Native and white cultures, modernising myths just as they both exploit the shapeshifting powers of the Native Trickster figure. For Highway, the Trickster figure is of crucial importance:

The dream world of North American Indian mythology is inhabited by the most fantastic creatures, beings and events. Foremost among these beings is the "Trickster," as pivotal and important a figure in our world as Christ is in the realm of Christian mythology. "Weesageechak" in Cree, "Nanabush" in Ojibway, "Raven" in others, "Coyote" in still others, this Trickster goes by many names and many guises. (Preface to Highway, *Kiss*)

In Highway's novel the Trickster is dressed in a different costume and has changed sex, for as he tells us, there is no gender marker in Cree. Now he appears as a white Beauty Queen, the Fur Queen of the 1951 Trappers' Festival when Abraham Okimasis, the father of the two boys in the story, won the Dog Sled race and was photographed being kissed by the Fur Queen. This Trickster dominates the spiritual landscape of the novel, scattering her mixed blessings with a wink and a smile, while for Robinson the jockey Trickster is transformed into a successful stockbroker with a "comfortable condo downtown" whose "small sly smile reveals how much he enjoys pulling the wool over everyone else's eyes" (Robinson 296). It is almost as if, in order to survive, these novelists like their protagonists have become shapeshifters themselves, just as their novels are distinguished by border blur, crossing boundaries between cultures, between time present and time past, between reality and dream, and between Native and non-Native readers. So they make possible access for white



readers into these texts to share their perceptions of the double nature of reality, where boundaries between material and spiritual worlds are drawn differently. They are telling old stories in new contexts, re-visioning myths at the same time as refashioning European literary genres for their own purposes. They are asserting their quality in literary terms that white readers relate to, but they are very outspoken about social inequality and the horrible legacy of colonisation, as they speak their resistance against that history of dispossession. Highway's playwright sees himself as a Cree culture warrior and Robinson's teenager Lisa Marie by the end of the novel is ready to take up her powerful inheritance as a shamanistic storyteller.

To theorise this process of cross-cultural negotiation a little further, I shall return to Stuart Hall's essay, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" where he outlines his paradigm of black Caribbean identity formation, for I believe it may be usefully adapted as a model to describe contemporary Aboriginal identities and artistic productions in Canada. Emphasising the multiple constituents within black Caribbean identities which destabilise notions of authenticity, Hall names three significant 'cultural presences' in the identity equation: 'Presence Africaine' which he calls the site of the repressed, 'Presence Europeenne' which belongs to policies of colonialism, racism and othering, and 'Presence Americaine', which is the "juncture point where many cultural tributaries meet" (Hall 398-402). This pattern based on slave history may be applied with few revisions to the identity formation of Canada's contemporary Aboriginal peoples. Instead of diasporic identities, we are talking about the First Nations where we need to remember that the Native experience of displacement has all happened on home territory. The crucial revised term of the paradigm is the first, where 'Presence Africaine' becomes 'Presence Amerindienne', referring to Native cultures which were systematically discredited through colonial government policies, Christian missionaries and residential schools, but which have survived, albeit fragmentarily, in Native communities. The second term does not need revision, for 'Presence Europeenne' bears the same negative colonial definitions of Native identity with its damaging social consequences of racist violence, self-alienation and hopelessness. 'Presence Americaine' becomes 'Presence Canadienne', the site of historical dispossession and marginalisation in the present, but which is paradoxically the site of hope, for it represents the border zone between white and Native cultures which is the only space available for the rehabilitation and reinvention of Native identities. This is the territory being reclaimed by Native artists like Highway and Robinson, an analogous space to Hall's modern Caribbean cinema of which he says: "By allowing us to see and recognise the different parts and histories of ourselves, to construct those points of identification, those positionalities we call in retrospect our 'cultural identities'" (Hall 402).

Both Highway and Robinson recognise that 'Presence Amerindienne' in their frequent use of Aboriginal words and phrases. Highway has several times confessed that he "creates and dreams in Cree," translating simultaneously into English as he writes" (Wigston 7) and *Monkey Beach* opens with a dream in Haisla:

Six crows sit in our greengage tree. Half-awake, I hear them speak to me in Haisla.
La'ès, they say, La'ès, la'ès.

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'és - Go down to the bottom of the ocean. The word means something else, but I can't remember what. I had too much coffee last night after the Coast Guard called with the news about Jimmy. (Robinson 1-2)

We might think of Cree and Haisla in these texts as the signs of an almost forgotten 'Presence Amerindienne' in these English language texts. For Highway's two brothers Cree is the language of their childhood before they are sent away to the Roman Catholic residential school at the ages of five and six (where they are forbidden to speak any other language than English), while for Robinson's teenage narrator, brought up in English in her Native community of Kitamaat, Haisla is the language of her grandmother and the private language of her parents; she understands it only in her dreams.

Native spiritual beliefs are there as the subtext to cultural life in Native communities on reserves or in the cities, preserved within living memory or in stories and religious practices underneath the Christianity imposed by the missionaries and priests. Both writers are dedicated to rehabilitating those beliefs, recognising that they may be transformed in the contemporary context. As the heirs of the recent revivalist tradition within Canadian Aboriginal cultural and political life since the mid 1970s, Highway and Robinson share the double vision that characterises the 'Presence Canadienne'. Both have a strong sense of place and the collective history of Aboriginal people, establishing through their writing a context of situated knowledge which relates to specific geographical locations and particular Native communities. Both novels chronicle the violent disruptions of colonial history from the perspective of their own communities. Highway tells the story of the coming of Roman Catholic missionaries to northern Manitoba in the 1850s not as a tale of enlightenment but as a tale of the breaking up of Native spiritual traditions, using the example of Chachagathoo, the last female shaman, who was condemned as a witch and who later hanged herself in a Winnipeg jail (*Kiss* 46-7). For Robinson, the deserted fishing villages and Native graveyards of the northwest coast testify to the destruction of Aboriginal populations and cultures at the end of the nineteenth century with the coming of white settlement. Both chronicle the continuation of that history of violence into the present, in interracial relations and perhaps most disastrously in the problems besetting Native communities themselves. These are both haunted texts, caught between the desire to listen to voices from the past and the desire to exorcise the damage inflicted by white colonialism.

Kiss of the Fur Queen is a novel about two Cree brothers from northwestern Manitoba, Jeremiah and Gabriel Okimasis, one a pianist who later becomes a playwright and theatre director, and the other who becomes an international ballet star. The novel has a strong autobiographical component, for these characters bear a striking resemblance to Tomson and his younger brother Rene who died of AIDS in the late 1980s and to whom the novel is dedicated in Cree. By choosing a form



which blurs the boundaries between fiction and life writing, Highway adopts an in-between position from which to write about the history of marginalised peoples - his own family history and that of his Aboriginal community - drawing attention to their still marginalised position within Canadian social structures. Highway's novel offers a significant variant on Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, for he presents a twinned portrait of two artist brothers. This twinning of the protagonists signals the double vision which is the novel's most distinctive feature as it moves continually, like the brothers, between Native and white cultures, representing the destabilising effects of cultural clashes and the resulting hybridised (often agonisingly split) identities of contemporary Aboriginal people. The novel's structure shares this doubling, for though it follows the familiar chronological pattern of a 'growing up' narrative charting the boys' rites of passage through childhood to adulthood as they find their vocations, yet overarching the linearity of this human-centred story is the wider dimension of Cree mythology. Using Cree words for which there are no equivalent concepts in English, the novel offers readers an alternative way of looking at history as circular and repetitive over generations, and where the borders blur between the living and the dead. As Highway remarked when the novel was published: "We acknowledge that the spirits of our ancestors are still with us, that they still walk this land, and are a very active part of our lives and our imaginations. We still have that while mainstream culture doesn't. It's lost that faith, that magic, that wonder" (Hodgson 5).

Highway's training as a classical pianist and a playwright is evident, not only in the novel's sonata form with Italian musical notations prefacing each of the six sections, but also in the narrative which is structured as a series of spectacular scenes. Equally evident is Highway's Native background and above all, it is the dominating presence of the Trickster figure in his new guise as carnival queen, who is there from the beginning to the end - smiling enigmatically from the sky at Jeremiah's birth and later watching over the two brothers from their father's talismanic photograph during the years at the residential school. However, the Fur Queen's magic is not strong enough to protect the boys from the sexual abuse of the sinister Father Lafleur. As Highway remarked at the time of the novel's publication: "My novel is about the killing of one religion by another, about the killing of God *as woman* by God *as man*. The novel is also about AIDS... but ultimately *Kiss of the Fur Queen* is about the revitalizing, life-giving force of art" (Hodgson 3). Highway uses his narrative and dramatic art in a struggle to restore Aboriginal people's belief in the psychological and spiritual value of Native traditions. The Fur Queen may be defeated once (or many times) but she returns in a vision to rescue the adult Jeremiah at his worst crisis of despair. This time she appears in the rather ritzy form of a white Arctic fox called Miss Maggie Sees, and though her language may be jockey and parodic, her message not to give up is relentlessly realistic:²

² 'Maggeesees' means 'fox' in Cree, as Highway's glossary informs us (*Kiss* 308).

So you get your little Cree ass out there. Just don't come here wastin' my time going, 'Oh, boo-hoo-hoo-hoo, poor me, oh, boo.'
'And who are you to tell me what I should or should not - ?'
'Honeypot, if I were you, I'd watch my tongue. Cuz you're talking to Miss Maggie Sees. Miss Maggie-Weesageechak-Nanabush-Coyote-Raven-Glooscap-oh-you-should-hear-the-things-they-call-me-honeypot-Sees, weaver of dreams, sparker of magic, showgirl from hell.' (Highway *Kiss* 233-4)

The Fur Queen is there at the end when Gabriel dies of AIDS in a Toronto hospital, leading his spirit away into the mists while she bestows a parting wink on his grief-stricken elder brother. It is a very mixed ending which combines tragedy and comedy in a similar manner to the climactic death scene in *The Rez Sisters* twelve years earlier. In that play the role of the Fur Queen is taken by a male Trickster figure called Nanabush, and to quote from Mark Shackleton's excellent essay: "The Bingo master dissolves into the shape of Nanabush as a bird of death, who escorts Marie-Adele to the spirit world, while her rez sisters together sing the Ojibway funeral song" ("Native" 50). Gabriel's death scene is no less spectacular, for it is presented in apocalyptic terms where the smoke from the sweetgrass being burned in the Native rites for the dying sets off the hospital fire alarm, bringing the fire brigade chief banging at the door. Inside the locked room, a battle is going on for Gabriel's soul between two kinds of spiritual power; that battle is won not by the white power of Roman Catholicism but by the Fur Queen. Her final wink reminds Jeremiah that things have come full circle once again. The Trickster's presence sheds a peculiar grace here, showing how Native spiritual beliefs may serve as survival strategies. There is cause for celebration as one brother survives, knowing that his vocation is to be a Native playwright, but it is counterbalanced by Gabriel's death, another casualty of colonial history.³

This pattern of balance and recurrence finds its parallel in the narrative movement of *Monkey Beach* where Lisa Marie survives and begins to reclaim her Native spiritual inheritance, but Jimmy her younger brother drowns. *Monkey Beach* is the story of a young woman's quest through a haunted wilderness as she searches for her brother who has disappeared on a fishing trip off the coast of British Columbia. Though the action takes place within only two days, the time scheme in this first person narrative expands through a series of erratic flashbacks into a novel of memory as Lisa Marie tracks back through the crucial events of her life in what quickly becomes a spiritual journey in quest of her own Native identity, "to find ways that help me make sense of tradition in a contemporary context" (Anderson

³ Highway was Artistic Director of Native Earth Performing Arts Inc in Toronto from 1986 to 1992, where he produced and directed his own plays and those by new Native playwrights. *The Rez Sisters* won the Dora Mavor Moore Award for Best New Play of 1986, and was one of two Canadian plays representing Canada at the Edinburgh Festival in 1987.



253). Though in the end she discovers the truth about her brother's death by drowning which she had dreaded from the beginning, that time of ghostseeing is also Lisa's own spiritual healing. Again, loss and death are balanced by the survivor's rehabilitation as a transformed human being.

As has been suggested earlier, *Monkey Beach* and *Surfacing* have striking structural parallels as quest narratives, though the objects of the quests are significantly different: for Atwood's white protagonist, the journey is back into her own past of repressed memory, whereas for Robinson's protagonist it is a quest for enlightenment through negotiating with the dead. The strongest similarities are the shamanistic descents into water and the women's visionary experiences. As Atwood said of the visionary sections in an interview in 1978:

In *Surfacing* it's a visionary experience in which language is transformed. There was some Indian influence on *Surfacing* at that point.

Interviewer: Has Indian myth or folklore influenced your poetic vision?

Atwood: Yes, I'm interested in it. It's one of the ways of viewing woman and nature now available to us. (Ingersoll 114)

Interestingly, the title poem in Atwood's *Procedures for Underground* (1970) is taken from a northwest coast Native legend, so that she would appear to have been entering the same geographical and mythic territory which *Monkey Beach* explores.

Yet, despite superficial similarities to *Surfacing*, *Monkey Beach* is closer to *Kiss of the Fur Queen* for, like Highway's novel, Robinson's is an exploration of a contemporary Native person's predicament of being caught between two cultures and systems of value, and the desperate need to transcend negative definitions of Native identity. Told this time from a woman's perspective, there is much greater emphasis on women's spiritual powers and the crucial importance of grandmothers as guides and preservers of tradition. In her own Native community Lisa Marie is an oddity and a misfit, for she is prone to seeing ghosts and having dreams, talents which once used to be valued but are now regarded as signs of psychic disturbance. (Her parents even take her to visit a white female psychiatrist who asks her if she believes in ghosts, while she sits there trying not to focus on "the thing that was beside her, whispering in her ear. It had no flesh, just tight, thin skin over bones" [Robinson 272]). Lisa Marie has the gift of second sight, inherited as her grandmother tells her through the female line of her family, for her great-grandmother was "a real medicine woman... If you wanted to talk to your dead, she was the one people went to... and she made beautiful songs —that no one sings anymore" (Robinson 154). All these are now forgotten, but Lisa has to face the challenge of recognising and learning to control her inherited gift across the disruptions of history and her modern English Canadian education:

God knows what the crows are trying to say. *La'ès* - Go down to the bottom of the ocean, to get snagged in the bottom, like a halibut hook stuck on the ocean floor; a boat sinking, coming to rest on the bottom. The seiner sank? Mom and Dad are in danger if they go on a boat? I should go after him? I used to think that if I could

talk to the spirit world, I'd get some answers. Ha bloody ha. I wish the dead would just come out and say what they mean. (Robinson 17)

This text is specifically located in present place and time, for Lisa gives a precise cartographic description of where her Haisla village is and she describes in great detail the spectacular northwest British Columbia terrain with its rocky inlets and tall forests, just as she tells us very clearly what Monkey Beach looks like. Yet this realism is blurred by a visionary landscape, for the first time we see the beach it is in one of her dreams: "At least I didn't tell them about the dream: the night *The Queen of the North* disappeared, I saw Jimmy at Monkey Beach. He stood at the edge of the sand, where the beach disappeared into the trees. The fog and clouds smeared the lines between land and sea and sky. He faded in and out of view as the fog rolled by" (Robinson 6-7). Monkey Beach is liminal territory: it is the geographical zone between land and sea, hemmed in by forests, and by the end it becomes the space for negotiations between the living and the dead.

Throughout the book, outlines blur and 'smear' as Lisa's memories, intuitions and dreams connect in a subtext of meaning, as if her real life only gradually catches up to her dream life by the end. This is where the white reader is likely to feel most an outsider. Accustomed to thinking of dreams in relation to Freud and the repressed (where a psychoanalytical reading suggests that dreams refigure a personal narrative which the dreamer cannot bring to consciousness), we are disconcerted to find that dreams here seem to figure the dimensions of an alternative reality which intertwines narratives of the self with the hidden narratives of others, so that Lisa's dreams are frequently not about her own life but about the lives (and deaths) of her brother or her grandmother. Could dreams here be closer to the phenomenon of second sight than to the repressed? The text asserts that Lisa cannot interpret these dreams very well herself because much of her Native heritage is cut off from her, and she does not understand much Haisla, even though she has heard it as a child and her grandmother has tried to teach her: "to really understand the old stories, she said, you had to speak Haisla" (Robinson 211). However, she understands enough to heed the dream voices in the old language. What the crows say at the beginning they repeat so urgently on the second morning after Jimmy's disappearance that she gets into her father's speedboat to go and search for him. Her quest ends at Monkey Beach, where she hears the spirits and finally understands what they say to her. Like her foremothers, Lisa Marie has learnt to contact the dead and to listen to their secrets, as she reclaims her gift.

This story of a sister-brother relationship pays more attention to the girl's development. Indeed, Jimmy's academic success and his ambition as a swimmer with the potential to be an Olympic Gold Medallist seem to run in counterpoint to Lisa's pervasive sense of failure at school. The only times she is really happy is with her Uncle Mick, the Aboriginal activist and Elvis Presley fan, and with her grandmother, her beloved 'Ma-ma-oo'. These two figures are loving mentors, who lead the girl back into the forest or out on fishing trips, telling her stories and teaching her the old forgotten ways of her ancestors. While Uncle Mick educates her political and social consciousness, proudly calling her "my little warrior", her grand-



mother nurtures her spiritual development, taking her to the graveyard to speak with her beloved dead and urging her not to be afraid of her gift: "You don't have to be scared of things you don't understand. They're just ghosts" (Robinson 265). Yet Lisa's growing up is full of pain and loss, and we need to remember that a significant pattern of imagery here is the anatomy of the heart: heart failure, heartbreak. Uncle Mick is drowned and her grandmother dies when her old house catches fire, and in both cases Lisa believes that if she had heeded her spirit warnings she could have saved them. Instead, she is overwhelmed by guilt and wastes part of her grandmother's inheritance on a self-destructive course of alcoholism and drug abuse in Vancouver. Yet, unlike so many of her school fellows, she is saved through the generous intervention of her cousin Tab, a biker chick who cannot save herself. Lisa Marie returns home and goes back to school, where her development seems to follow an opposite pattern to her brother's, for it is he who now feels a failure. Having abandoned his hope of becoming an Olympic swimmer after an accident to his shoulder, he is tormented by a lack of confidence and self-worth, and is broken up when his girlfriend leaves without any explanation. Once again, as in Highway's novel of a double quest, it is through sibling love that Jimmy is rescued. His sister takes him to Monkey Beach, but things are more complicated than she imagines and all she can do is to win a partial victory over circumstances. Jimmy is granted an ecstatic moment of freedom when he swims with the whales: "I hold him there in my memory, smiling, excited, telling me how they moved like submarines, and how the water looked so much more magical when they were swimming in it" (Robinson 353-4). Jimmy, like Gabriel Okimasis, is doomed: even his romantic dream is shattered when he discovers that his beloved Karaoke has been sexually abused by her uncle, and he goes off in the salmon boat with him: "I knew he'd never forgive himself if he screwed this up" (Robinson 365).

The final visionary section set on Monkey Beach is called 'The Land of the Dead.' This is the time of Lisa Marie's spiritual crisis and the end of her quest, when out of longing for her lost brother she calls on the hungry ghosts, offering her own blood in a ritual gesture of propitiation. In return, she is given the dream knowledge that Jimmy murdered Karaoke's abuser and sank his boat, but that Jimmy also drowned. In her own near-death experience when she goes down to the bottom of the sea (following a shamanic ritual which has its parallel in Atwood's *Surfacing*), Lisa meets Jimmy in the watery underworld: "Jimmy stands beside me and holds his hand out for me.⁴ The moment I touch it, warmth spreads down my arm" (Robinson 372). However, he pushes her vigorously to the surface and back to the world of the living, while the ghosts of Ma-ma-oo and Uncle Mick encourage her to return to life. Saved by her own family ghosts, Lisa finds herself back on Monkey Beach; it is here that she has her vision of the ghost dance and suddenly understands

⁴ For the shamanistic elements in Atwood's works, see Van Spankeren.

clearly the words the ghosts are singing, “even though they are in Haisla and it’s a farewell song” (Robinson 374). The novel ends elegiacally, with Lisa Marie left alone on the deserted beach, listening to the mingled sounds of a voice “not quite human, not quite wolf” and “in the distance the noise of a speedboat” (Robinson 374). My reading is that she has survived and is now ready to face the future with a new sense of her Native identity and growing confidence in her spiritual powers.

For both Highway and Robinson, storytelling through voices or through writing is of crucial importance, because storytelling is more than a way of resistance for Native people; it is also a way to psychic healing: “Native art can be a more effective healing instrument than social workers or the courts” (Hodgson 5). It also seems to me that, perhaps paradoxically for these contemporary writers, storytelling functions in a traditionally Aboriginal manner as a kind of magic, which blurs the borders between the material and spirit worlds, as between past and present. In both novels we have witnessed a very complex figuring of identity for their Native protagonists, all of whom are split subject oscillating between the values and traditions of two cultures. Any singular identity is not possible. When one identity is always shadowed by the other, identities become positional or performative, so that the subject might be in danger of psychic fragmentation. Both novels register these possibilities in their carefully balanced representations of survival and loss, though it is significant that the visionary endings relocate their subjects in a context of Native spiritual traditions. Though we could not read either of these endings as assertions of an essentialist Native identity, given the intricate cross-cultural negotiations conducted throughout the narrative, both novels seem to suggest the importance of spirituality in contemporary attempts to refigure what ‘being Native’ means. Finally, what is any reader to make of these novels’ resistance to closure? The simple answer would be that stories about the redefinition of Native identities are far from finished in real life or in fiction, for these are identities always in process. An answer which pays more attention to narrative art would suggest that just as these novels have shifted the boundaries of Western literary conventions to accommodate different mythologies and alternative ways of apprehending reality, so these endings break up closure to open the way for the “revitalizing, life-giving force of art” (Hodgson 3) together with a new recognition of Native being.



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