

The power of naming: monkey beach as associational literature



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The novel *Monkey Beach*, written by Eden Robinson, can be called an example of what Thomas King has named “associational literature” (King p. 14) because, even though the novel includes issues which are directly connected to the impact and repercussions of colonialism, it does not place the colonizer at the center of the story. Essentially it is not in reaction to the issues of colonization but is instead a construction of Aboriginal based reality. The novel is written using a traditional orature style which emphasizes an Aboriginal worldview instead of revolving itself around a “non-Native expectations concerning the glamour and /or horror of Native life”. (King p. 14) The first page of *Monkey Beach* opens with the crows speaking to Lisa “in Haisla”. (p. 1) Nobody else in her family shares her shamanic abilities and her mother teases her about it being a “sign” that she needs “Prozac”. (p. 3) This introduction represents the overarching and repeating issue that weaves throughout the entire novel: the difference between Native and non-Native realities. Robinson grounds the novel in the Native mindset first by using the traditional oral style of including information and teaching as part of the storytelling and second by using the Haisla language itself as an integral component of the narrative.

Lisa’s grandmother, Ma-ma-oo, represents traditional Haisla knowledge and culture. Following the Aboriginal worldview, she not only acts as Lisa’s mentor throughout the novel but she roots the Native perspective into reality. Ma-ma-oo speaks the Haisla language, harvests the traditional foods, and teaches the old ways through her stories and actions. While Lisa and Ma-ma-oo are out digging up “Oxasuli, a powerful medicine [that]...protects you from ghost, spirits, [and] bad medicine” (p. 151), she tells her granddaughter

about the “ tree spirit...a little man with red hair...[who would] lead medicine men to the best trees”. (p152)This is the same little man who has been visiting Lisa since she was a very young girl. This moment in the novel creates a space for the readers “ reality” to shift from the non-Native to the Native perspective by allowing room for, and the possibility of, an alternative reality to the Eurocentric one. The contrasting and competing of realities becomes especially dramatic during the scene with the psychiatrist, Ms. Jenkins. Lisa is able to see “ the thing...whispering in [Ms Jenkin’s] ear...its legs wrapped around her waist” (p. 273) and at the same time she gives Ms. Jenkins the “ normal” answers, saying only what the doctor wants to hear. It becomes clear that the non-Native view can not” consider the issue of spirits and visions beyond allegory, symbol, or symptom”. (Castriciano p. 805)Robinson uses the power of traditional knowledge to emphasize the reality of Lisamarie’s experiences. Rather than using these supernatural beings as a means to express repressed “ collective trauma [and the] dark stain of colonialism” (Mrak), a psycho-analytical interpretation that David Gaertner calls “ white noise of European culture” (p. 47), she presents these creatures as real and in doing so maintains the reality of the Haisla culture itself.

In the traditional style of oral history and storytelling, Robinson incorporates education as a main component of the novel and teaches the reader both directly and indirectly about Aboriginal knowledge, ceremony, and attitudes. She gives detailed information about where to find, and how to process, traditional foods such as qoalh’m, oolichan, native berries and others. She offers an inside view of rituals, like how to speak with the dead, and her

characters demonstrate the Aboriginal conception of the natural world as living being by showing respect, giving offerings, and, as Lisa's mother says, being "polite and introducing yourself". (pg. 112) The world is portrayed not as passive screen on which to project our drama but as a beautiful land and seascape that is not only "a breathing character" teeming with life, but is also inhabited by ghosts, spirits, and animals who interact with the human world. (Bridgeman) Robinson uses the traditional Haisla names as she speaks about the world. The use of the Aboriginal language reinforces the idea that two different world views are occupying the same space and it emphasizes the Haisla culture as autonomous and complete. Robinson explains that "Haisla has many sounds that don't exist in English, so its not possible to spell the words using English conventions... English sounds are formed using the front of the mouth, while Haisla uses mainly the back". (p. 193) This supports the idea that there are not only different realities at play but that English itself is incapable of expressing or capturing what is "Haisla". As Ma-ma-oo teaches Lisa stories of b'gwus and the shapeshifters she says "to really understand the old stories...you had to speak Haisla". (p. 211)

Throughout the entire novel the power of words, names, and language are emphasized. When Lisa attends her uncle Mick's funeral, his relative Barry is singing "an honour song, [but she is not able to] understand anything they [are] singing". (p. 141) The same thing happens when she accompanies Ma-ma-oo to Octopus Beds where they build a fire to give offerings and speak with Ba-ba-oo, Lisa's long dead grandfather. Lisa is still an outsider because she has not yet learned her own language, she still is living in the European

space, in the front of the mouth. It is not until the end of the novel that Lisa finally is able to hear and understand the Haisla language, to comprehend and integrate her own heritage. Instead of ignoring or avoiding the Haisla reality, Lisa embraces it in an attempt to find out what has happened to Jimmy. When she cuts her hand to feed the spirits on Monkey Beach she makes the transition from one reality into the other. In this final scene Lisa is able to journey into "The Land of the Dead" and use the information that her grandmother has taught her. Here she sees and speaks with her grandparents and her uncle Mick, she also has a vision of what happened to her brother Jimmy, and, most significantly, she is able to understand the words the people are singing "even though they are in Haisla". (p. 373) In this moment of understanding the transformation from one reality to the other has been completed.

Robinson's novel can be called associational because it presents a narrative in which the protagonist struggles to negotiate between the opposing worldviews of Native and non-Native and shifts away from a typically Western psychological interpretation of meaning, a binary dichotomy between good and evil, and a projected clear cut happy ending. It is Robinson's use of traditions and her continued framing of Lisamarie's visions as reality which keeps the novel from sliding into what Joan Thomas has called "a glorious Northern Gothic" tale and keeps the novel firmly planted in the back of the mouth.

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