

SUBVERSION AND THE STORYTELLER

SUBVERSION AND THE STORYTELLER:
EXPLORING SPIRITUALITY AND THE EVOLUTION OF TRADITIONAL
NARRATIVES IN CONTEMPORARY NATIVE LITERATURE IN CANADA

By

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ABSTRACT:

This thesis explores the intersection of storytelling and spirituality in contemporary Native literature in Canada. The invocation of the oral tradition and its history will be examined in the works of Eden Robinson, Joseph Boyden, and Harry Robinson, as each author attempts to orient his or her narratives within a First Nations framework. By gesturing towards orality in their written literature, these authors acknowledge the dialogic nature of a narrative that has been shaped by ancestral experiences and memory and thus write against the colonial master narrative of the contemporary Canadian nation-state. In Joseph Boyden's *Through Black Spruce*, Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach*, and the transcribed collections of Harry Robinson's stories, the invocation of orality becomes the vehicle through which to explore Indigenous ways of knowing and traditional spiritual beliefs. This thesis first considers the ways in which the mode of storytelling allows each author to create a new narrative that introduces readers to an Indigenous perspective on the processes of history. It then examines the evolution of specific spiritual beings from traditional narratives into contemporary settings as a way to explore neocolonial attitudes and the compromised contexts of modern Indigenous life in communities across Canada that continue to be haunted by a legacy of colonization. I end with an exploration of the potential for healing that each author envisions as communities move into a decolonization process through the regeneration of tribal languages, a reconnection to sacred space, and a reimagining of the Canadian master narrative and its colonial interpretation of history.

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INTRODUCTION:

“Stories are wondrous things,” writes Thomas King in *The Truth About Stories*, “[a]nd they are dangerous” (11). I often find myself reminded of this statement when I engage with much of the literature and politics of the Indigenous peoples of Canada, for it is through this assertion that King arrives at the heart of much of the conflict that continues to define the relationships between First Nations and Settler communities across the country and continent. In this thesis, I examine the way storytelling, and the invocation of the oral tradition and figures from Indigenous cosmologies that reside within this tradition, are “dangerous” to the colonial master narrative, challenging the misinformation and dismissal with which many Canadians descended from a Euro-Settler background approach First Nations people and their unique belief systems. In Joseph Boyden’s *Through Black Spruce*, Eden Robinson’s *Monkey Beach*, and the transcribed stories of storyteller Harry Robinson, the invocation of orality becomes the vehicle through which to explore Indigenous ways of knowing and traditional spiritual beliefs within a contemporary setting.

I turn back to King’s statement here as I recall an incident that took place recently, when the reality of what I have spent months researching and writing about intruded upon the Ivory Tower that my fellow grad students and I often find ourselves cloistered away in while working on our MA dissertations. My roommate was in the process of moving, and was selling her furniture; a man arrived one Tuesday to buy her bed. While I sat at my desk, researching and writing, my friendly roommate helped the man carry the bed outside to his truck. A few minutes later, she stormed into my room

and, with a groan of frustration, related the conversation she had just had. Upon politely inquiring if the man was from Hamilton, he replied that he was, in fact, from Caledonia. My roommate, not being from Ontario, admitted that she did not know where that was. She told me that, shocked, the man responded, “What? Haven’t you heard of the Indian problem¹? How could you not have heard of it?” and launched into “his story” (“history”?) of the Douglas Creek Estates conflict, ending with, “And now the Indians are trying to claim that the land is theirs!”²

While my roommate’s encounter with this man left us both angry at and frustrated with his display of such systemically sanctioned ignorance, I also found myself feeling a slight sense of unease. There I was, researching and writing on these very tensions, and how they are both constructed and negotiated through story and storytelling; and yet, after my roommate related her story, I was completely unsure of how I would have reacted to this man’s flagrant ignorance. In a seminar setting, surrounded by educated, liberal-minded colleagues, it is easy to have productive conversations and debates about “authorial intent” and postcolonial theories and literatures, all the while forgetting that the opinions of those in the classroom do not always reflect that of the society in which

¹ Consider the statement that Duncan Campbell Scott, deputy minister, made to a parliamentary committee in 1920: “I want to get rid of the Indian problem... Our object is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic, and there is no Indian question, and no Indian Department” (qtd. in Miller 191). It is doubtful that the man from Caledonia was ever aware of D.C. Scott, or the statement he made about “the Indian Problem,” but the implications of the Caledonian man’s statement clearly extend beyond the Caledonia land claims dispute, representing a sentiment that has been effectively diffused into National epistemology through misinformation and collective ignorance.

² For readers who do not know the history of Caledonia, in February 2006, members of the Six Nations took up occupation on the Halimand Tract of land outside of the town of Caledonia, upon which a subdivision known as the Douglas Creek Estates was set to be built. In what has become known as the Douglas Creek Estates conflict, the construction company claims that Six Nations surrendered their rights to land in the nineteenth century, and the construction company subsequently bought it. Conversely, the Six Nations protesters insist that they never ceded rights to the land and, therefore, the Crown was never in a position to sell the land to the construction company (“Native occupiers” 2006).

we live. That this man did not consider what he was saying to be potentially offensive to my roommate, a young, white woman, suggests that he believed his story about the “Indian problem” to be a shared truth between them, or, should I say, a shared truth between the “us” that he imagined in the “us” versus “them” divide. This realization, and my own implication in this man’s “us/them” narrative inspired me to examine closely my own subject position as a non-Indigenous student of literature, trained in a Euro-centric education system, writing about First Nations oral traditions and spirituality.

Until coming to McMaster University in 2005 for my undergraduate degree, I had not heard of the Caledonia land claims disputes either. I began my university career as Six Nations protesters began their occupation of the disputed land outside of Caledonia. Witnessing the support for and involvement in First Nations issues by staff and students, while also taking classes in postcolonial theory and Native Literature demonstrated to me the possibility of studying literature that has found contemporary relevance at the local as well as national level. In choosing to study Indigenous literature produced in Canada, I am aware that certain aspects of it will remain inaccessible or elusive to me as a descendant of white European settler society, both culturally and epistemologically. I do not see this as an absolute deterrent in the study of Indigenous literature by non-Indigenous scholars. It does, however, mean that we have a responsibility to acknowledge our own subject position, and the assumptions and views that we bring to our readings of the literature.

As Jo-Ann Episkenew explains in *Taking Back Our Spirits*, “The myth of White superiority has become entrenched in the psyche of the North American settler

population” (3) through a master narrative “which valorizes the settlers but which sometimes misrepresents and more often excludes Indigenous peoples” (2). This nicely illustrates Thomas King’s assessment of stories as “dangerous”: the “myth of White superiority” is a story that has been told and retold since first contact between Europeans and Indigenous tribes of North America, and it continues to be perpetuated by a small but persuasive group of scholars who maintain that many Indigenous cultures have not surpassed the “barbaric” stage of human development (on a scale from savagery to barbarism to civilization), which, they argue, has resulted in “difficulties in developing abstract reasoning” (Widdowson and Howard 12-13). It is this hurtful mentality, which Taiaiake Alfred considers “a certain way of thinking with an imperialist’s mind,” (102) that I see contemporary Indigenous authors consistently responding to and challenging. The deep-seated convictions of the Caledonia man from my anecdote about the perceived “Indian problem” are informed by a colonialist mentality that is still pervasive today in Canadian society, a mentality that continues to define Indigenous-Settler relationships. His harmful convictions, however, strengthen my own belief in the importance of studying and engaging with First Nations literature as a means of shaking up and endangering the colonialist mentalities and underlying racist attitudes that I see in much of contemporary Canadian society and politics.

This dissertation has grown out of my own interest in the figure of Joseph Boyden’s windigo and the appearance of this and other spiritual beings into the contemporary settings of Native literature. That these “myths,” which many people tend to consider artifacts of vanished cultures, are given new life by First Nations authors

writing for a broad contemporary audience suggests that these texts are offering readers a different vision of the world and different ways of knowing through the stories they tell, challenging popular opinions like those of the Caledonia man, and offering new perspectives. The windigo, a cannibalistic monster that traditionally resided in the frigid forests of Northern Ontario's subarctic region, finds its way south in Boyden's novel *Through Black Spruce* as its voracious appetite for human flesh evolves into a greedy hunger for power and insatiable need to participate in the insanity of capitalist consumption. While ethnographic studies have historically been undertaken almost exclusively by Western scholars, First Nations authors are giving Canadians an opportunity to reassess their own culture and society through an Indigenous framework. After reading Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach*, I recognized that she was using the B'gwus, a mythic figure from Haisla cosmology, in a manner very similar to Boyden's windigo; but in order to properly examine the function of both creatures, I needed to first explore the oral traditions from which they evolved. This led me to the compelling collections of Harry Robinson's transcribed oral stories, which capture the spirit and performance of Harry's storytelling and demonstrate the process of adapting old stories to new settings.

More generally, Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach*, Joseph Boyden's *Through Black Spruce*, and the collections of transcribed oral narratives by Harry Robinson are works that, while categorized as Native literature, have been written for a broader contemporary audience: *Monkey Beach* became a Canadian National Bestseller and a finalist for the 2000 Giller Prize; *Through Black Spruce*, also on the Bestseller list, won

the 2008 Giller Prize; and Harry Robinson told his stories with both an Indigenous and non-Indigenous audience in mind (*Stories* 89), intending them to reach “all Province [sic] in Canada and United States” (Wickwire 457). These authors work to subtly subvert from the inside-out; they are, to quote the title of the short story collection edited by Joy Harjo and Gloria Bird, “reinventing the enemy’s language.” After a colonial history of forced assimilation through cultural repression and language suppression, most Indigenous authors writing today are working in English instead of their own tribal language. They are emerging from an ancestral past that has experienced, in the last few generations, the devastating effects of residential school and the criminalization of religious ceremonies and practices. In the 1895 amendment of the *Indian Act*, under section 114, the Canadian government legislated that:

[e]very Indian or other person who engages in celebrating [...] any Indian festival, dance, or other ceremony of which the giving away or paying or giving back of money, goods, or articles of any sort forms a part, or is a feature whether such gift of money, goods, or articles takes place before, at, or after the celebration of the same [...] is guilty of an indictable offense. (qtd. in Chan and Mirchandani 28)

The primary concern of the white Europeans who made these amendments to the Indian Act was that “the pace of assimilation would be slowed if Indian people continued these practices” (Chan and Mirchandani 28). The injurious effects were magnified by the experiences of those sent to residential schools, where children were punished, either through forced labour or beatings, if they spoke their tribal languages or expressed their cultural identities (Haig-Brown). While the *Indian Act* would eventually be amended

again in 1951, this time to decriminalize religious ceremonies, without language to express and transmit the cultural practices that had been banned, whole generations were doomed by the 1895 amendment to forget many of their cultural and religious practices and ceremonies.

Contemporary First Nations authors, emerging out of this history, have little choice when it comes to the language in which they write. Even if they are fluent in a tribal language, the audience, both Indigenous and not, are most likely working within an English-speaking context. Instead of being limited by the colonizer's language, however, First Nations authors "reinvent" it as a way to resist neo-colonial attitudes and master narratives. In the works of Eden Robinson, Joseph Boyden, and Harry Robinson, we see each author invoking the spirit of the oral tradition, the original mode of expression for most tribal communities across pre-contact North America. These authors are working against a Euro-centric readership "prone to view non-Western literatures in terms with which they are familiar, however irrelevant those may be to them, and have therefore called traditional North American Indian literatures 'primitive', 'pagan', 'savage', and 'childlike'" (Petrone 4). Such claims could not be further from the truth. Instead, oral narratives were used to reinforce cultural practices and norms (Episkenew 4), communicate the histories and rules of beliefs and behaviours of the tribe (Petrone 3), and chronicle "important information, which is stored and shared through a literacy that treasures memory and the spoken word" (Borrows 14). As a system of transmission passed down through the generations, oral narratives were constantly being adapted to reflect the experiences of members of the community and the changing needs of the

society (Episkenew 4). Indigenous authors like Eden Robinson, Joseph Boyden, and Harry Robinson invoke this system and its history in the literature that they produce; “[a]s a literature grounded in the political and social realities of life on Canada’s reserves and in its urban centres, while also being rooted in oral tribal traditions, it [Native literature] reveals a continuum of the ancient and the modern” (Petrone vii). By invoking the oral tradition in their written literature, these authors acknowledge the dialogic nature of a narrative that has been shaped by ancestral experiences and memory and thus write against a linear “master narrative,” and it is here that I truly see these authors “reinventing the enemy’s language.”

Monkey Beach, Through Black Spruce, and the collected stories of Harry Robinson are each populated by human and non-human beings from the tribal cosmologies of each author’s ancestral heritage. These spiritual beings often emerge out of what non-Indigenous readers consider to be “myths,” which seems to have now become synonymous with fiction. This association does not necessarily reflect a First Nations view; instead, Penny Petrone suggests that “[a]ll Indian traditions are valid guides to reality” (12). In traditional narratives—“myths”—, these spiritual creatures are appreciated for more than their entertainment value. Harry Robinson’s Coyote, a figure also found in the works of other well known Indigenous authors like Thomas King, is a great example. As a “trickster” figure, Coyote plays many roles, but he is not, as the word “trickster” implies, a fool or a fraud. Instead, Coyote is both a healer and a disrupter (Smith), who “gets into trouble when she/he becomes disconnected from cultural traditional teachings... and remind[s] us about the good power of interconnections within

family, community, nation, culture, and lands” (Archibald 197). However, like the oral tradition in which Coyote finds expression, Coyote does not remain static, nor is he relegated to an ancestral past that in no way reflects contemporary social, cultural, political environments. For Harry Robinson, at least, Coyote is alive and well, inhabiting Harry’s cosmological and epistemological reality. The Okanagan storyteller demonstrates this with a story about Coyote’s son, Young Coyote, making the first visit to the moon. Harry relates that “Coyote’s son was the first man on the moon!/ And Mr. Armstrong was the second man on the moon./ So the Indians know that,/ but the white people do not know what the Indian know” (*Heart* 92). As trickster figure, Coyote’s biggest “trick” is, perhaps, his ability to transcend our expectations, appearing in contemporary settings in order to subvert those master narratives and “trick” people into imagining a different way of knowing. Coyote, like other spiritual beings in the works of Joseph Boyden and Eden Robinson, acts as a bridge connecting human characters to the traditional spiritual past while also providing a counter-narrative. As Lee Irwin suggests in his book *Native American Spirituality*, “the old myths can become a refuge against the rising of many alternative myths which lack the continuity and fullness of a more integrated and fulfilling way of life” (4). In a broad sense, then, this thesis examines the intersection of storytelling and spirituality, as all three authors turn to their own oral literatures, narratives, and modes of expression as a way to recover and reconnect with traditional spiritual beliefs. I would suggest that the authors are also insisting upon our consideration, as readers, of spiritual understandings of protagonists, instructed by tribal

stories as alternative epistemological, ideological, and ontological models which encourage a sense of spiritual and cultural healing, regeneration, and resistance.

Before outlining the details of each chapter, I should first outline what I mean by spirituality in the context of this thesis. Much of how I have come to understand the concept of Indigenous spirituality is illuminated in Lee Irwin's discussion of the topic. He writes:

spirituality in this context is something more than simply practicing a particular religion. This word 'religion' doesn't sit well in such a context either, being as it is a postenlightenment concept often rooted in a polarity between ideas of the 'sacred and profane.' Such a distinction is an artificial and nonhelpful locus for understanding the primary foundations of Native spirituality. My perception for the interactive spheres of Native communal life is that they have a relatedness through personal relationships that finds common expression in mutual, everyday concerns. Ceremonial activity, prayer, or simply carrying out daily activities like driving a friend to work or struggling for political rights may engage individuals in aspects of 'religious' concern. It is that connectedness to *core values and deep beliefs* that I mean by 'spirituality'--a pervasive quality of life that develops out of an authentic participation in values and real-life practices meant to connect members of a community with the deepest foundations of personal affirmation and identity. In this sense, spirituality is inseparable from any sphere of activity as long as it really connects with deeply held affirmative values and sources of authentic commitment, empowerment, and genuineness of shared concern. (Irwin 3)

In Irwin's lengthy and thorough meditation on spirituality, what I find most compelling is the emphasis he places on the importance of community to individual participation in the

sacred. In what may seem antithetical to the Western obsession with individualism, the individual is liberated to be herself when she finds herself part of a healthy spiritual community that connects persons through foundational core values and mutual concern for the well-being of others. What Irwin does not mention, but what I think is important to recognize is that in Indigenous spirituality, these connections are not just established between people; animals, the land, and the spirits that inhabit a tribal cosmology are all acknowledged as part of a healthy community, and as such, are deserving of an equal respect and concern (Kuokkanen).

While Irwin's description nicely illustrates the universal features of a Native spirituality, we must remember that there is no pan-Indigenous culture or belief system, no essentialized Native identity. Each author is writing out of his or her own unique tribal history, shaped by distinct ecologies, cosmologies, and ancestral memories. Eden Robinson is a Haisla woman who sets *Monkey Beach* in the Haisla community of Kitamaat, British Columbia. In this familiar landscape, Robinson populates the world of protagonist Lisamarie with figures from Haisla cosmology: the b'gwus, a west coast sasquatch-like creature, T'sonoqua, a female ogress, and a tree spirit who appears to Lisamarie as a little man with red hair. Joseph Boyden, of Ojibwe/Metis ancestry, sets his novel *Through Black Spruce* in the Northern Ontario town of Moosonee and surrounding area, populated by a cast of Oji-Cree characters. The windigo, an insatiable cannibalistic monster of Oji-Cree cosmology, has moved south, out of the subarctic climate of its traditional narrative setting, threatening the integrity of the community with a different, but equally gluttonous form of consumptive hunger. Harry Robinson, of Okanagan

ancestry whose mother was a member of the Lower Similkameen Indian Band, inhabits Coyote country. His stories, which are often set in the Similkameen Valley where he spent most of his life, are inhabited by Coyote and other “mythic” figures that find expression and meaning in the everyday of Harry’s life. The works of all three authors are haunted by these spiritual presences, but this haunting often subverts the spectre of colonialism, which continues to plague the integrity and well-being of each community. In each text, the protagonists or storytellers turn to traditional narratives and tribal cosmologies as a way to negotiate the compromised contexts of contemporary life—shaped by a history of colonization--on and off the reserve while also deploying them to better understand their own roles in reestablishing the spiritual foundations upon which healthy communities can begin to rebuild.

In various ways, this thesis expounds on the instances when spirituality and acts of storytelling intersect to create a counter narrative that frames experience and history within a First Nations framework while also establishing a foundation for the regeneration of Indigenous epistemologies, traditional cultural values, and communal well-being. In Chapter One, the importance of storytelling and the oral tradition is showcased as all three authors deploy this traditional mode of expression in order to locate their texts within a First Nations framework. Invoking the vitality of the oral tradition allows each author to create a new narrative that reads against Western master narratives of colonization to bring us an Indigenous perspective on the processes of history. This oral tradition also works to connect individuals to traditional values and cultural beliefs through a shared ancestral narrative memory. As each author

demonstrates, it is often the women who, while historically marginalized and disenfranchised through the *Indian Act*, often carry the responsibility of maintaining and regenerating the traditions of the tribe and the spirit of the community. This concern with the maintenance and regeneration of tradition and spiritual foundation is further explored in Chapter Two, as I address the cannibalistic windigo and other similar creatures, and the threat they pose to the integrity of the individual as well as to the community. As a spirit of excess (Johnston, *Heritage* 167), the windigo is understood to be both a literal cannibal as well as the embodiment of greed and excessive material consumption. As the authors of each text use their protagonists' struggles against the windigo's insatiable appetites (or the *spatla* in Harry Robinson's story and the b'gwus in *Monkey Beach*) to explore neocolonial attitudes and their effects on First Nations communities across Canada, they also turn to acts of grateful consumption that demonstrate, by contrast, what the windigo spirit lacks and destroys. In each text, it is through these acts of grateful consumption that individuals are brought together in communion through mutual respect and a shared concern for the ecology that sustains them.

After examining themes of violence in Chapter Two, as represented by the windigo and other spiritual figures of Indigenous cosmology, the final Chapter of this thesis explores the potential for healing that each author envisions as communities move into a decolonization process through the regeneration of tribal languages, a reconnection with sacred space, and a reimagining of the Canadian master narrative and its colonial interpretation of history. While these three authors are realistic in their expectations of what can be restored and what has been lost, they present us with a vision of hope and the

potential to move forward. This vision is not just intended for an Indigenous readership, however. As a non-Indigenous reader, I do not believe that Eden Robinson, Joseph Boyden, or Harry Robinson are asking me to subscribe to the system of belief that they illustrate in their texts. On the contrary, I believe that there are important elements of their spiritual traditions that are intended to remain inaccessible, as they are not meant to be appropriated by settler society and culture. Instead, I believe that *Monkey Beach*, *Through Black Spruce*, and the stories of Harry Robinson invite Native and non-Native readers alike to consider First Nations spiritual narratives as pedagogical tools which can guide us towards a reinterpretation of the colonial tradition in order to encourage positive and productive engagement with the distinct but equally valuable traditions of First Nations culture and spirituality.

CHAPTER ONE:

“It Is Not To Be Hidden”: Storytelling and the Oral Tradition in Harry Robinson, Joseph Boyden, and Eden Robinson

In this chapter I explore the ways in which Harry Robinson, Eden Robinson, and Joseph Boyden invoke the spirit of the oral tradition and the act of storytelling in their texts to firmly establish a First Nations context that challenges historical metanarratives determined by Canada’s colonial past. This oral tradition speaks to a lineage inherent within tribal narratives, which connects the storyteller to the ancestors through whom these stories have been passed. For each author, the role of women in the maintenance and regeneration of traditional knowledge and tribal ways of knowing is highlighted against a history in which their rights as Indigenous women and as people were being denied. Eden Robinson, Joseph Boyden, and Harry Robinson each emphasize the role women play in the continuation and perpetuation of the oral tradition, re-establishing their importance in society as a direct challenge to the position in society imposed upon Indigenous women by the 1876 *Indian Act* and a history of colonization and missionization.

Harry Robinson’s story “Twins: White and Indian” sets a remarkable context for understanding the history of oral literature, the different values placed on oral and written literary production, and the racial and colonial paradigms that surround each. Harry introduces readers to a vision of the world’s creation within an Indigenous cosmology while also offering an explanation for why the “White and Indian” have come to rely on very different modes of expression, and why this has since led to so much conflict

between the two communities. Harry recounts that when forming the world, God's intentions are to create only four nations of people but He accidentally creates a set of twins, the Indian and the *SHA-ma*, meaning "white man" (*Heart* 33). The founders of each nation are sent out with a written set of documents which, God explains to them, will "tell you what you going to do/from the time you landed in there/till the end of the world. It'll tell you what you going to do. And you got to follow that" (*Heart* 41). God is, essentially, providing them with both the creation myths upon which their identity will be determined, and the laws that they will use to govern the nations they establish. One man is sent to China, one to India, and one to Russia, but God is left to decide how he will deal with the twins. God leaves the fourth document under a stone and goes away to contemplate a resolution. When he returns, the document is missing and God realizes that the younger twin, ancestor to the white man, has stolen the paper. Though the younger twin denies this,

he had it here.

God knows.

And that's become tell a lie,

the younger one.

And that younger one,

now today, that's the white man

...

And that's why the white man,

they can tell a lie more than the Indian.

But the white man, they got the law.

...

It's begin to do that from that time till today.

And now, if the white man tell a lie,
it don't seem to be bad.
But if the Indian tells a lie,
that's really bad.
That's what they do.
See? (*Heart* 46)

God exiles the younger twin to a land across the ocean, but not before telling him that one day, when the two nations are reunited, the white man will have the responsibility of showing “the Indians” what has been written in the document. “But,” as Harry points out to us, “he [the white man] don't tell the Indians the whole story./ He hiding some” (*Heart* 50).

In “Twins: White and Indian,” Harry offers an explanation for many of the tensions and misunderstandings that occurred between early Settlers and Indigenous peoples and have continued, up to the present day, to define relationships between these two populations. For the descendants of the younger twin--“Whites”-- truth is contained within the words of their founding documents which, according to Harry, implies that the word does not represent truth until it has been written down as “law.” And even then, it seems to be a partial truth, obscured by those who, entrusted with the responsibility of explaining what is in the law, “don't tell the Indians the whole story.” This ‘less-than-truth’ comes from white equivocation, refusing to share the whole truth while monopolizing exclusive access to the written law. The older twin's descendants, left without a set of written documents that contain the history and trajectory of their nation and would instruct the older twin's descendants on how to govern themselves, were

instead left to rely on the spoken word to express their stories of creation, their governing laws, and to convey truth and their shared vision of cultural and spiritual realities³. In describing the importance of the spoken word for First Nations populations across the country, Penny Petrone maintains, in *Native Literature in Canada: From the Oral Tradition to the Present*, that,

[t]he oral literature of Canada's native peoples embraces formal narrative, informal storytelling as well as political discourse, song, and prayer. Much of this literary expression was didactic in nature, communicating the respective histories and rules of belief and behaviours of the diverse tribes, and perpetuating their specific world views that gave the cosmos its origin, order, and meaning... By transmitting specific cultural knowledge, with its specific meanings and messages, it helped strengthen tribal identity and provided for its continuity. (3-4)

As Harry's story demonstrates, this accounts for why Indigenous peoples, as descendants of the older twin, place such emphasis on the ability to express truths through the spoken word, and why it is therefore so much worse "if the Indian tells a lie." While the reader may not necessarily subscribe to Harry's vision of *why* these differences exist between Indigenous and Settler literary modes of production, expression, and ways of knowing, the value of Harry's story is in showing that these differences *do* exist, and that they remain socially and politically relevant.

³ The division between oral and written literature is not as absolute as sometimes assumed. Many scholars now resist the opposition, as it narrows our views of what constitutes writing and literature. Oral cultures often contain many "texts" made up of symbols which, while non-syllabic and non-alphabetic, are still read: "woven and beaded belts and blankets, knotted and coloured strings, carved and painted trays, poles, doors, verandah posts, canes and sticks, masks, hats and chests," as J. Edward Chamberlin reminds us, "play a central role in the cultural and constitutional life of these communities, functioning in all the ways written texts do for European societies" (20).

Harry presents “Twins: White and Indian” as a sort of creation myth, but the concern he expresses over truth and the articulation of truth in law continues to resonate today in Canadian courts and legislation. As John Borrows suggests in *Recovering Canada: The Resurgence of Indigenous Law*, “there is a propensity [in some societies] to doubt the reliability of oral traditions in drawing inferences from and conclusions about the past. This bias is evident in the way Aboriginal traditions have been treated in Canada” (86). Before colonial contact, Indigenous peoples “carried their history in the spoken word and incorporated their values in story and song” (Petrone 10). However, their reliance on the spoken rather than the written word led early settlers to believe that Indigenous cultures were primitive and illiterate, and that the people were therefore incapable of complex thought and articulating abstract ideas (Johnston, *Extinction* 102). This has led to Euro-Canadian culture affording “far greater cultural capital [to]... the literary than the oral” mode of expression (Gingell 226), the effects of which can be seen in Canadian land claims cases like *Delgamuuk v. British Columbia*, which found its way to the Supreme Court. In this particular instance, the Supreme Court was asked to rule on the Gitksan and Wet’suwet’en peoples’ claim to Aboriginal title and self-government over a substantial tract of land in the northwestern part of British Columbia. For millennia, the Gitksan and Wet’suwet’en have recorded their history, legends, laws, rituals, and traditions in oral collections called *adaawk* and *kungax*, respectively (Borrows 89). These oral recitations “speak of these people’s proprietary rights and responsibilities in the disputed territories and tell of the Indigenous legal regimes that govern relationships in their homelands. As sources of legal authority, the *asaawk* and

kungax may be used to evaluate individual and collective actions” (Borrows 89).

However, European settlers, today’s legal courts, and Harry Robinson’s younger twin have all made the accusation that these non-written collections are too “subjective” and do not, therefore, represent any legal claim to the land. Moreover, to accept the asaawk and kungax as testimony and legal authority places equal weight on the Indigenous perspective, which would “problematize Canada’s claim to exclusive legal jurisdiction” in those territories; Gitksan and Wet’suwet’en evidence:

records ‘fact’ that the unjust extension of the common law and constitutional regimes often occurred through dishonesty and deception, and that the loss of Aboriginal land and jurisdiction happened against the will of the First Nations and without their consent. These traditions include memories of government deception, lies, theft, broken promises, unequal and inhumane treatment, suppression of language, repression of religious freedoms, restraint of trade and economic sanctions, denial of legal rights, suppression of political rights, forced physical relocation, and plunder and despoliation of traditional territories. Oral traditions can be controversial because they frequently undermine the law’s claim to legitimacy throughout Canada by shedding light on the illegality and/or unconstitutionality of Crown action.(Borrows 88).

It is interesting to note that Harry Robinson’s “Twins: White and Indian,” and the asaawk and kungax “stories” presented in the *Delgamuuk v. British Columbia* court case both explain the dishonesty of “white” writing and law while also holding forth the possibility of the truth eventually emerging. These narratives, and the act of telling them, are a call to truth, demonstrating an Indigenous perspective on commonly accepted Eurocentric readings of history and legality: “that whites were a banished people who colonized this

country through fraudulence associated with an assigned form of power and knowledge which had been literally alienated from its original inhabitants” (Wickwire 30).

Not only do Indigenous and Eurocentric cultures have different views on written versus oral modes of expression, but they also maintain distinct relationships with language itself. In an essay entitled “One Generation from Extinction,” Anishinaabe scholar Basil Johnston asserts that “[o]nly language and literature can restore ‘Indian-ness’” (100). While this may seem like a bold statement, given the regenerative powers Johnston affords to the word, Johnston’s claim may in fact reveal a fundamental difference in the way Indigenous and Western societies conceptualize their relationships with language. At the beginning of the 20th century, Ferdinand de Saussure introduced his formulation of semiotics. His central point—that the relation between signifier (words) and signified (the specific concept evoked by those words) is arbitrary, and only a matter of human convention—has since come to define the way many Western societies view their relationships with language. Harry Robinson paints a very different picture, however, of the inherent meaning of words, and their sense of power. In the story “Coyote Gets A Name and Power,” the world has just begun, and names are being given out by the Chief. As Basil Johnston notes, a name conferred in a naming ceremony “was more than just a term uttered to identify someone. It was also a reputation and a term which embodied his character” (*Heritage* 141). The name itself has innate qualities, which the individual is then responsible to uphold. In Harry’s story, Coyote, known then as Shim-ee-OW, arrives late to the naming ceremony and there are only two names left: KWEELSH-tin, or Sweathouse, and Shin-KLEEP, meaning Coyote. Coyote is unsure of

which name best suits him, so the Chief explains to Shim-ee-OW the qualities that each name embodies. He tells Shim-ee-OW, “[i]f you take the name of KWEELSH-tin,/ you can be KWEELSH-tin./ That’s the Sweathouse./ You can be only in the one place at all time” (*Heart* 60). The Chief then explains the responsibilities that accompany this name; when people come to KWEELSH-tin, they will “build a fire and put the stone in the sweathouse,/ and go in there/... That’s like *in* you... That’s what you going to do./ That’s going to be your job (61). However, the Chief warns Shim-ee-OW that he may get tired of staying in one place, and Shin-KLEEP may therefore be a better name for him. As Shin-KLEEP, or Coyote, Chief explains that “you’ll have the power from me./ Then you can go all over the place... You kill the monster... That’s the animals they can kill and eat people (62). Given these choices, Shim-ee-OW eventually decides upon the name Shin-KLEEP, which grants him the power to hunt and kill the monsters that threaten his cosmology and a peaceful existence. Harry’s story is in direct conflict with de Saussure’s Eurocentric analysis of language, which maintains that a word must be understood in terms of the concept it evokes and the meaning formed through the relationship between signifier and signified. In “Coyote Gets A Name and Power,” Coyote’s power is, at least in part, derived from the name he is given. Harry introduces us to an approach to language that is completely antithetical to de Saussure’s, one in which the relationship between word and meaning is not arbitrary; words can define that to which they refer, whether inanimate or living, and words are responsible for the ways in which an object or being acts or understands itself. In Harry’s view, words are literally responsible for ontology.

For First Nations cultures, stories, songs, and other oral expressions of the word were used in the transmission of cultural knowledge and in the formation of cultural identity through shared narratives. Given the innate power of words, as demonstrated by Harry Robinson, as well as the role that storytelling played in the culture and traditions of First Nations communities, the word was approached with spiritual reverence: “[w]ords did not merely represent meaning. They possessed the power to change reality itself. [Indigenous peoples] relied on the ability to use and manipulate language—the fluent and artful use of words—to influence not only other people but also spirits” (Petrone 10). The word was imbued with sacred power because it was used to express history and cultural values, but it was also believed that the word could be used to “control cosmic and spiritual forces that governed their lives. Such power is not attributed to the spoken word in literate societies, where attempts to change the physical world through language are regarded as magic, as ‘hocus-pocus’” (Petrone 10).

For Harry Robinson, the power of words and stories, as well as the cultural importance of the storyteller, are recurring themes in all three collections of his narratives. In the story “Don’t Forget My Song,” Harry relates an incident in which he experiences the inherent power of words first-hand. While boarding with an “Indian doctor,” Harry learns from the woman that the gun he carries is going to be used against him:

“There is someone is going to get you.
Then he’s going to take this gun
and he going to kill you with that gun.
It was your gun,

but whoever they are,
they're going to use your gun to kill you.
But we'll see what we can do."

So they sing awhile. (*Nature Power* 176).

Harry is initially skeptical of the Indian doctor but after she accurately predicts the weather Harry is convinced of her abilities. She repeats her song, and this time Harry joins in. After they sing together, "she says, everything is all right./ Not to worry anything./ What I tell you, they all the same./ Her word is always true./ Whatever she says, is like that" (*Nature Power* 184). Safe from the threat his gun posed, Harry and his readers/listeners are left to consider the power that the Indian doctor's words contained and the truth they hold. While those of us who do not share in Harry's belief system may remain skeptical of the story—perhaps the danger of the gun exists only within the structure of the narrative—Harry Robinson truly believes in the messages of his stories and dedicates the greater part of his life to disseminating them. The gun, long used as a symbol of European power, was first introduced to North America with the arrival of early explorers and settlers. David Thompson, an early English explorer, fur-trader, and surveyor in Canada, records a conversation with Piegan Chief Saukamappee, who could remember the introduction of guns in the mid-eighteenth century, and the changes this made to tribal warfare. Saukamappee describes two battles, occurring ten years apart, between the Peigan tribe and the Snake tribe. In the first battle, Saukamappee recalls both sides using the lance, and bows and arrows, tipped with either stone or iron. Each tribe set up shields of wood and bison hide, and, facing each other, would send their weapons

flying at the opposing side. After a day of fighting, “night put an end to the battle,” with only a few injured and no one killed (Thompson 329).

Saukamaptee then relates the events of the second battle, in which the Peigans were armed with 10 guns. He recalls how, at 60 yards apart, “we watched our opportunity when they [of the Snake tribe] drew their bows to shoot at us, their bodies were then exposed and each of us, as opportunity offered, fired with deadly aim, and either killed, or severely wounded, every one we aimed at” (Thompson 331). The sun, says Saukamaptee, “was not yet half down” when their opponents took flight. At the end of the day, Saukamaptee remembers the death count was more than fifty (Thompson 332).

After the introduction of guns, power became heavily unbalanced, resting almost exclusively in the hands of those who held these new weapons. The guns were also responsible for the depersonalization of violence; arrows and lances require you to see your enemy up close, while the guns caused much confusion for Saukamaptee and his fellow warriors, who “were at a loss... as not one could declare he had actually slain the enemy” (333). Through the introduction of the gun, violence was disconnected from responsibility. This alienation of power is expressed by Harry Robinson in “Don’t Forget My Song,” as the power of his gun threatens to be used against him, an experience also reminiscent of the alienation from power and knowledge that Harry describes the older twin, and his descendants, facing in “Twins: White and Indian.” In “Don’t Forget My Song,” Harry describes how words are used to reestablish power in his favour. The Indian doctor’s song functions as what Neal McLeod calls “wordarrows,” a term borrowed from Gerald Vizenor (1978). McLeod writes that words “are like arrows that can be shot at the

narratives of the colonial power...[W]ordarrows can help to establish a new discursive space” (“Stories” 31). Wordarrows can rebalance the power dynamic between settler and Indigenous societies, as traditional stories and songs told and sung challenge those Eurocentric master narratives that exclude or suppress Indigenous voice and presence. As a Western symbol of power, the errant potency of the gun is rendered impotent against Harry by the song of the Indian doctor, whose “word is always true.” Thus, wordarrows are deployed to reconnect the gun to its owner and re-establish responsible use of the technology of violence. As with “Twins: White and Indian,” the word—in this case, the Indian doctor’s song-- is also expressed as a call to truth, one that seeks to create a narrative in which power-through-truth is used to equalize the dynamics of power in Indigenous-Settler relationships.

For Harry Robinson, the storyteller, like the Indian doctor, also has the same responsibility to convey the truth through his words. According to Wendy Wickwire, the anthropologist who transcribed Harry’s stories into three separate compilations, Harry “never fictionalized stories. Indeed, the very concept of fiction was foreign to him” (*Nature Power* 20). Instead, Harry retold stories that had been shared with him throughout his life. Faced with an audience who, increasingly, were unable to understand his stories in the Okanagan language, Harry began telling his stories in English. While no longer relating stories in his native language, Harry was still concerned with conveying his stories accurately and truthfully because of his belief in the importance of his stories for everyone: “Used to be I thought I could tell only to Indian./ But later on, I thought white people and Indian, they all the same” (*Stories* 89). Harry continued to tell stories

that he hoped would be accessible to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences: “‘It is not to be hidden,’” he wrote in a letter to Wickwire. “‘It is to be showed in all Province in Canada and United States. That is when it come to be a book’” (Wickwire 457). For Harry, it became essential that he share his stories, not only because they act as vehicles of traditional cultural and spiritual knowledge, but also because the stories offer alternate visions of history, challenge dominant epistemologies, and serve as explanations for why these differences exist.

Reading Harry’s stories, the audience quickly becomes aware that Harry is working within a mode of expression and a language that are not his primary ones. Questions may arise about the “authenticity” of the stories, given that they are being published in the language and literary mode of the colonizer. I would argue, however, that in the editing and formatting of the collections, steps are taken by both Harry and Wendy Wickwire to resist a Eurocentric reading of his stories and to instead promote an Indigenous framework through which to approach each narrative. Instead of telling his stories in the Okanagan language, Harry relates them in English, translating them as he goes. In this way, the stories are not being translated and reinterpreted by someone with less knowledge about the cosmological and epistemological systems within which Harry is working. As is apparent from the previous examples, little editing has been done with regards to the grammar, and each story has been transcribed onto the page in the style of free verse. Both of these decisions draw attention to the performative style and voice of the storyteller which is a reminder of the oral mode within which Harry Robinson is working, and acts as a way to subvert a conventional Eurocentric approached to

literature. According to Neal McLeod, this is the function of storytelling and the role of the storyteller: “[s]torytelling is a subversive act that causes people to question the society around them. Storytellers hold the core of a counter memory, and offer another political possibility” (99-100).

Joseph Boyden and Eden Robinson also face the challenge of working within a written tradition of literature while attempting to subvert Eurocentric approaches by presenting an Indigenous framework within which to read their texts. Each author is writing popular fiction intended for a wide audience of Indigenous and non-Indigenous readers alike, while also attempting to establish an Indigenous context, which is understandably difficult when writing for a wide audience. Readers may have similar questions over the “authenticity” of texts as Native literature when also sold as popular fiction. I would contend, however, that while Eden Robinson’s *Monkey Beach* and *Through Black Spruce* by Joseph Boyden have made it on to National Bestseller lists, both authors attempt to frame their narratives in a First Nations context in order to subvert traditional approaches to written literatures.

In the essay “Re-Creation in Canadian First Nations Literatures,” Robin Ridington suggests that:

[e]pisodic interrelated vignettes performed by a knowledgeable narrator are typical of First Nations oral literatures. Each story builds upon every other in a network of interconnection. Each telling of a particular episode allows the listener to recreate it and the entirety of which it is a part... The story has its being as a conversation between narrator and listener. (225)

Both Boyden and Eden Robinson employ this technique of “episodic interrelated vignettes” told by first-person narrators in order to invoke the spirit of the oral tradition within their written texts. In *Through Black Spruce*, Boyden develops a dialogue between uncle and niece, with each chapter alternating between the two and both voices responding to events and themes in the previous chapter. Annie, a young Cree woman, relates her story to her uncle Will, who lies in a coma in the hospital; she left home to find her sister Suzanne, the beautiful model who went missing in New York City. For his part, Will’s story, told from within the silent world of a coma, is a reflection on his life, and on his attempts to contend with the Netmaker family, who are slowly destroying their own community with drugs smuggled up from “down south.” As the narrative progresses, we come to understand that the stories of Annie and Will complement each other and fill in gaps or illuminate certain details that would otherwise be left unclear if the text relied on just one narrator. More than this, however, there is an urgency and a necessity that required Will and Annie to share their stories with the other. For Will, who spends the majority of the narrative in a coma, occupying a frigid, barren space between the worlds of the living and the dead, telling his story becomes a matter of life or death: “I’m so tired, but I’ve got to get up or I’ll freeze to death. Talking to you,” he tells Annie, “it keeps me warm” (4). Will, like Harry Robinson, recognizes that stories come with their own power, and function outside of Western epistemological approaches to medicine and healing.

Annie visits Will almost every day in the hospital, sharing her own stories with him. Her friend, Eva, who is a nurse, encourages Annie to talk to him, which Annie

continues to do even though she does not get any physical response from her uncle. When doctors threaten to send him to a hospital in the south—to one of the big cities in Southern Ontario—Annie panics. Having experienced life in the south, Annie wants her mother and the doctors caring for Will to know “that our family doesn’t do well down south, that when we leave our home, the world becomes an ugly, difficult place, that I know as sure as I’ve ever known anything that if Uncle Will is taken away from his home, he will shrivel and die” (176). This leads Annie to tell what she calls “an absolute lie” to her mother: “Uncle Will has been responding when I talk to him” (176). Afraid to lose Will to the south like she did her sister, Annie says the one thing she knows will keep him in Moosonee. However, she underestimates her power as a storyteller, and the power of words. Not long after, Annie arrives at the hospital to find that Will has become responsive and that everyone credits her with the miracle: “‘You were right, Annie,’” Will’s friend Gregor tells her as she enters the room. “‘We can heal him with words’” (315). Similar to Harry Robinson’s experience with the Indian doctor whose song protects him from being shot by his own gun, Annie’s words are revered as having a similar power. In her candid approach to sharing her experiences with her uncle, the truth of her words serves to protect and revive her uncle.

In *Monkey Beach*, Eden Robinson similarly uses a first-person narrator to relate episodic events to the readers-as-listeners, which they must then use to recreate the world in which the storyteller is working. Lisamarie is a young Haisla woman working through the events that led to the disappearance of her brother, Jimmy, at sea while also coming to terms with her own troubled past. She illuminates for us the hours that follow after she

and her family receive word that Jimmy's boat does not arrive at its destination and contact with the ship has been lost; interspersed throughout the narrative, Lisamarie also reflects back on events from her past which provide a context through which to understand later incidents in the novel. Lisamarie's experiences are largely shaped by her interactions with Haisla spiritual figures. She is haunted by a little man with red hair, whose sporadic visits begin to represent a pattern in Lisamarie's life: his appearances foretell often traumatic events, like the death of close family members. These interactions remain, at least initially, mysterious and unwanted, their meaning inaccessible to Lisamarie. Reflecting back, "the pattern of the little man's visits seems unwelcomely obvious, but at the time, his arrivals and departures had no meaning" (27). Lisamarie's parents, who grew up as part of the generation of First Nations children sent to residential schools, are of no help to their daughter. Taught to devalue their tribal culture, the traditional Haisla narrative is, for them, "just a story" (9). For Ma-ma-oo, Lisamarie's grandmother, these stories instead represent what Marie Battiste and James Youngblood Henderson call "enfolding lessons. Not only do they transmit validated experiences; they also renew, awaken, and honor spiritual forces" (77). Ma-ma-oo attempts to explain the little man's presence, and Lisamarie's ability to see him, with stories. She tells Lisamarie that the little man is a tree spirit, "a guide, but not a reliable one" (153).

Ma-ma-oo also explains to Lisamarie that her ability to see the little man is a power transmitted through the women in her family. She tells Lisamarie that her own great grandmother "was a real medicine woman... people were scared of her. If you wanted to talk to your dead, she was the one people went to" (154). However, even more

surprising for Lisamarie is finding out that her own mother was once gifted with the same ability, but, as Ma-ma-oo explains, growing up in an environment of hostility towards Indigenous cultures, when assimilation was the end-goal of residential schools and public policy, with “that kind of gift, she makes people nervous” (153). It is a gift that makes Lisamarie nervous too, and Ma-ma-oo tries to provide Lisamarie with ways of understanding the “gift” she has been given. She describes her power in terms of “good medicine and bad... Tricky stuff” (154), warning Lisamarie, “you have to respect it” (151). Ma-ma-oo’s stories do not provide outright explanations; instead, they focus on “processes of knowing” (Battiste and Henderson 77).

Lisamarie initially has difficulty negotiating these Haisla processes of knowing into her daily life, and after Ma-ma-oo has a heart attack she turns to Western epistemology for answers. She learns everything she can about the human heart as a way to cope with the trauma: “[i]f the arteries are narrowed with plaque deposits, your heart will tingle. These unpleasant pins and needles in your chest are episodes of *angina pectoris*... If the plaque breaks off and blocks the arteries that send blood to your heart muscle, your heart will starve. This is a heart attack” (269). While this “science lesson” and several others like it may appear incongruous and overly didactic in a narrative that draws so heavily from Haisla cosmology and spirituality, they provide an effective foil, reminding readers that epistemological approaches and ways of knowing are many and varied; a healthy heart keeps one physically alive, but Ma-ma-oo’s lesson for Lisamarie is that a full and healthy knowledge of tribal stories keeps one spiritually alive by connecting them to the traditions and teachings of a community.

When Ma-ma-oo dies in a house fire, Lisamarie is overwhelmed with grief at having ignored the portentous visit of the little man with red hair. After also losing her favourite uncle Mick and being raped by her friend, Lisamarie is unable to cope with the guilt she feels, lamenting, “[i]f I had listened to my gift instead of ignoring it, I could have saved her” (294). She drops out of high school and moves to Vancouver, where she attempts to escape her emotional and psychological pain through drugs and alcohol. Prepared to “stay... that way for years” (297), Lisamarie is visited by the ghost of her cousin Tab, who accuses her of “wallowing in misery” (300) and tells Lisamarie to “[g]et [her] act together and go home” (301). Worried that Tab has died because of a similar hard-partying lifestyle, Lisamarie returns home to be with her family, only to discover that Tab is still alive. Lisamarie begins to see the potential of her gift after this, attempting to come to terms with her ability to interact with the spirit world and the portents they send. When an old friend confides in Lisamarie that he saw his friend’s ghost the day he committed suicide, Lisamarie explains that it was “a death sending... [and] nothing to worry about. He probably just wanted to say goodbye” (313). She admits that she can also see ghosts when she’s sober (313), and maintains a relationship with Ma-ma-oo, who sometimes appears to her in the morning when Lisamarie wakes up (312). Coming to terms with her gift and the potential it holds for her, Lisamarie turns once more to Ma-ma-oo’s traditional stories in order to begin recreating an identity grounded in traditional epistemologies and ontologies, and in Haisla spirituality.

Lisamarie begins afresh, moving back in with her family and enrolling in high school again. Her first assignment in school is “to modernize a myth by analyzing it then

comparing it with someone real” (337). Lisamarie chooses a Haisla figure, T’sonoqua, an ogress who pretends to be a helpless old woman but who, if you get to close, “will straighten to her true height, and the hands that grip you will be as strong as a man’s” (337). T’sonoqua has not received the same infamy as B’gwus, the Haisla sasquatch: “discredited scientists and amateur sleuths aren’t hunting her. She doesn’t have her own beer commercials. She has a few amusing notes in some anthropology books. She is remembered in scattered campfire tales. But she is, by and large, a dim memory” (337). In T’sonoqua Lisamarie finds a sort of totem and recognizes certain aspects of herself. As a child, Lisamarie is given the endearing nickname “Monster” by her uncle Mick after fighting off a group of bullies and landing one of the boys in the emergency room (66). As she gets older and begins to interact with spirits and non-human creatures, Lisamarie is taught to internalize her gift as a monstrosity, with her parents suggesting she needs Prozac (3) or therapy, and friends ostracizing her: “Freaky’s here!” yells one friend at a party. “Talking to fucking ghosts... You’re such a freak” (319-20). But as Lisamarie begins to understand her gift, the “monstrosity” of it is transformed into potential. She recalls Ma-ma-oo’s description of the plant *oxasuli*, which takes on new meaning as she begins to understand her own power; *oxasuli* is a “[p]owerful medicine. Very dangerous. It can kill you, do you understand? You have to respect it” (151). For Lisamarie, T’sonoqua, like *oxasuli*, is not just a metaphor for her own power. Both are to be feared but also respected within the Haisla tradition, and Lisamarie sees the scariness of each and has confidence in the face of her fear. Thus, the power of this other-than-human-creature and the danger posed by *oxasuli* is not neutralized, nor is the fear, which ensures

that she continues to respect each. It is through these lessons, which are revealed to her by Ma-ma-oo, that Lisamarie begins to understand the potential of her own gift and to see herself in distinctly Haisla terms, which “gives value to her talent in a context that fuses contemporary concerns with long-standing tribal narratives” (Andrews 21). As a young woman gifted with the ability to commune with the dead and interact with spiritual figures from Haisla cosmology, Lisamarie uses the stories of Ma-ma-oo to recognize that she is descended from powerful women and a tribal tradition which are deserving of, and still command, respect.

Storytelling, therefore, is more than an expression of Indigenous epistemologies; it also serves as a vehicle through which to establish both a genealogy of storytellers past and present, and a relationship to the cultural environments in which they work. While stories themselves are clearly crucial to maintaining a connection to cultural and spiritual traditions of one’s heritage, it is also the individuals through whom these stories are passed that connect individuals to a specific cultural past, spiritual tradition, and sacred space. Neal McLeod calls this “narrative memory,”⁴ which he defines as:

more than simply storytelling. A skilled storyteller strings narratives together to suit a particular audience. Some details maybe downplayed or accentuated, depending on what the occasion calls for. As the storyteller weaves his tale, there are elements of description and analysis: the storyteller describes events and experiences, but also analyzes this experience. The stories are reflected upon and critically examined, and

⁴Neal McLeod, as a Cree scholar, calls it “Cree narrative memory” in his book *Cree Narrative Memory: From Treaties to Contemporary Times*, though I feel that the term “narrative memory” applies equally as well to Haisla (Eden Robinson), Ojibway-Cree (Joseph Boyden), and Okanagan (Harry Robinson).

they are brought to life by being integrated into the experience of the storyteller and the audience. (7-8)

In *Monkey Beach*, *Through Black Spruce*, and the stories of Harry Robinson, an effort has been made by each author to provide the audience with this lineage of stories, and women are central to the project of establishing and perpetuating Indigenous ways of knowing through storytelling. Not only does this heritage establish a strong relationship between individuals and their physical, cultural, and spiritual environment, but the women who represent these connections also represent a return to traditional ways of knowing and being, and are written against a colonial history that has dispossessed Indigenous women of their rights, status, and power.

In *Monkey Beach* it is Ma-ma-oo, Lisamarie's paternal grandmother, who serves as the link between Lisamarie and her Haisla heritage. Ma-ma-oo is a vessel of traditional and spiritual Haisla knowledge but is also a living link to other individuals from Lisamarie's past, such as her great-grandmother. Lisamarie is a young woman who is trying to come to terms with her spiritual "gift," which allows her to communicate with the dead and interact with non-human beings from Haisla cosmology, but ones that few others believe in, let alone can see. After Ma-ma-oo explains to Lisamarie that her mother had similar abilities as a young woman, Lisamarie confronts her mother, who responds by telling her daughter "not to listen to any of Ma-ma-oo's stories" (194). But it is precisely these "stories," which her mother rejects, that Lisamarie requires to understand her own potential, and her role in the Haisla community and traditions. Stories about her great-grandmother, the powerful medicine whose abilities to contact the dead garnered her great respect in the community, and those of T'sonoqua, the ogress whom Lisamarie

fears but also respects for her strength, are part of the narrative memory that Ma-ma-oo imparts upon Lisamarie in an attempt to establish a connection to an Indigenous (Haisla) way of knowing, and to include Lisamarie within an lineage of powerful and respected female figures to whom she can look for guidance and support.

Joseph Boyden's *Through Black Spruce* emerges not only from an Oji-Cree cultural tradition, but also from the narrative memory that extends beyond the novel itself to its prequel, *Three Day Road*. In *Through Black Spruce*, Will and Annie envision themselves descendants from Niska, one of the protagonists of *Three Day Road*, and her legacy as windigo killer. The windigo⁵, a cannibalistic monster of the sub-arctic forests of Northern Ontario, is a haunting presence in both novels but, like the oral tradition through which knowledge about this creature is transmitted, the windigo is constantly adapting to new environments and social organizations. For Niska, the windigo is the same creature featured in the traditional Oji-Cree oral narratives, a menace that plagued starving Ojibway and Cree communities in the dead of winter. Niska later shares these stories with her nephew Xavier, and explains the responsibility she held in the community as windigo killer, obligated to assume this role when the windigo spirit infects a member of a small Cree community (*Road* 240). Later, Niska shares this experience, as well as traditional windigo narratives with her nephew Xavier as a way to help him comprehend the all-consuming, madness-inducing violence he experiences as a soldier in the First World War.

⁵ For a detailed discussion on the windigo and its role in Indigenous narratives, see Chapter Two.

In *Through Black Spruce*, the stories of Niska and Xavier are related to the younger generation, and while they speak of personal experiences, they are aimed at addressing both Will's and Annie's situations in the present. Will turns to the windigo tales told to him by his father, Xavier, as a way to understand both the problems of substance abuse that are slowly consuming the Indigenous youth across the James Bay region and the role he must play in attempting to stop it. The monster may have evolved, but the destruction it inflicts upon the community is equally damaging. Annie also confronts the cannibal's consuming and destructive greed for power in the world of modeling, and looks to the stories of her grandfather, Xavier, and Niska. Contemplating her experiences in New York, Annie reflects that her grandfather "had experiences I can't even begin to imagine, and I don't know if even those experiences would prepare him for this, for where I am" (249). While those experiences may not have prepared Xavier for the world of high fashion, they have prepared Annie, who relies on the stories of Niska and Xavier to understand her own experiences within a traditional Cree way of knowing.

Niska also undermines the attempts of the Canadian government to place First Nations children into residential schools, first eluding the experience herself in order to return "back into the time of [their] ancestors, living on what the land would give" (*Road* 87). Years later, when Niska's nephew Xavier is sent to a residential school, Niska returns to rescue him. She takes him to live with her in the forest, educating him instead in the secrets of a disappearing Cree tradition and teaching him skills of "trapping and hunting in the bush" (*Road* 202). These skills, lost by all but a few elders, are imparted upon Will and Annie by Xavier, who teaches his son and granddaughter the same lessons taught to

him by his aunt. Will recognizes how scarce this knowledge has become, and the role that the older generation must play in the acquisition of it: he reflects that “I’ve always been the bush man in this town. I’ve been the hunter, the trapper, the feeder of mouths. A thing passed on from father to son, and I was the one in possession of it” (55). His father, however, would never have been in possession of it without Niska, and Will recognizes this by acknowledging both Niska and Xavier on subsequent hunting trips, “whisper[ing] a hello to my father and to my great-auntie Niska” (188). Will then undertakes the responsibility of passing this knowledge of a traditional Cree way of life to Annie, and the memories of this “burn inside [Annie] like red coals” (344). She recalls how Will “took [her] to the bay every year since [she] was a baby, drove [her] miles by river in [his] freighter canoe to where the river ends” (344), in order to teach his niece hunting and trapping skills that later enable Annie to rely on herself and the ecology surrounding Moosonee for her livelihood. Annie, proving to be adept at these skills, is given the nickname Niska (345) and, for Will, upholds the possibility of “[m]aybe... becoming what my father believed she would” (357).

Harry Robinson’s grandmother also emerges as an influential figure and strong female presence in Harry’s youth and development as a storyteller. By invoking her presence in his stories, Harry evokes the spirit and knowledge of the elders in his community and the narrative memory they carry with them. Harry relates how his grandmother first heard the stories she would go on to tell him from her uncle, “and every time they [the uncle] tell these stories/ and my grandmother was kinda old enough to listen,” she would memorize them. The relationship was reciprocated, as her uncle, John

P. Curr, enjoyed having an audience to whom he could pass his stories on to, telling his niece: ““That’s a good idea. Stay when I tell the stories”” (*Stories* 86). Harry remembers back to when he was six years old, in 1906, “[a]nd they [his grandmother] begin to tell me [stories],/ they keep on tellin’ me every once in a while seems to be,/ right along ‘til 1918./ And she died shen she was 85” (86). Not only does Harry credit his grandmother with sharing her stories with him right up until her death, when Harry is eighteen, but she is also the reason Harry “know a lot of things” about “what is going to go, and what is been going and so on” (86). The stories, invoked as the narrative memory of numerous members of Harry’s family and community, provide Harry with an Okanagan framework through which, as we saw demonstrated in narratives like “Twins: White and Indian,” he can recreate events that give precedence to Indigenous cosmological beliefs and epistemological approaches.

Harry’s stories, like those of Ma-ma-oo in *Monkey Beach* and of Niska in *Three Day Road* and *Through Black Spruce*, are passed down through a lineage of storytellers, highlighting grandmothers as the purveyors of traditional stories and Indigenous knowledge. As Harry’s storytelling shows, however, this role is not exclusive to women; Harry Robinson’s great great-uncle John P. Curr was clearly influential in the dissemination of Okanagan stories within the community, and Harry himself assumes the responsibility of storyteller once he recognizes that the stories he heard in his youth were no longer being told. In Harry Robinson’s narrative, as in *Monkey Beach* and the novels of Joseph Boyden, it seems that the elder woman represents both authority—the stories they tell are truly from a tradition of communal and inter-generational narrative memory-

- and intimacy—the stories come from someone who loved and cared for the younger generation who are now telling us, the readers, their story. The stories are therefore specific, aimed at addressing a person's situation in the present with traditional knowledge and the accumulated experiences of a tribe's numerous generations.

As I have attempted to illustrate in the above discussion, elders in First Nations populations across the country play a central and fundamental role in the acquisition and dissemination of traditional spiritual and cultural knowledge, and through their stories are able to share their knowledge and experience with the younger generation. What I hope has become evident is that for Harry Robinson and the characters in the novels of Joseph Boyden and Eden Robinson, elder *women* have been especially essential in the preservation and cultivation of traditional tribal knowledge within their communities. All authors are writing (or telling) against colonial forces that have attempted to minimize or even erase the power that women once held in their communities. Before the colonization of North America, Indigenous women played multiple and varied roles within their society: they were clan mothers, medicine women, and even women warriors, and played a crucial role in tribal politics and the choice of tribal chiefs (Shoemaker). With the invasion of European colonizers, this was radically changed:

In the centuries since the first attempts at colonization in the early 1500s, the invaders have exerted every effort to remove Indian women from every position of authority, to obliterate all records pertaining to gynocratic social systems, and to ensure that no American and few American Indians would remember that gynocracy was the primary social order of Indian America prior to 1800 (Allen 3).

While the above quotation refers to First Nations populations in America, I would argue that this reading of history also holds true for Canada, which we can clearly see reflected in Canada's 1876 *Indian Act*. Under this archaic act, First Nations peoples of Canada occupy the category of "Indian," which has been separated from that of "Person." According to the *Indian Act* "[t]he term 'person' means an individual other than an Indian" (*Indian Act* 3). However, even the term "Indian" is restricted in its usage, referring first to "any male person of Indian blood reputed to belong to a particular band" and, second, to "[a]ny child of such person" (*Indian Act* 1-2). Moving away from the "gynocratic social systems" that were traditionally relied upon to govern many Indigenous communities, the *Indian Act* was attempting to replace "gynocracy" with a patriarchal form of governance. Under the 1876 *Indian Act*, a woman was only acknowledged within the categorization of "Indian" "if she is or was lawfully married to such a person" (2). This status was effectively lost once she married an individual other than an "Indian" man (2), which essentially left her as a non-Person, denied even those "privileges" and rights set out in the *Indian Act*. Under Canadian law, Indigenous women were stripped of their self-hood and leadership responsibilities and subjected to the most extreme manifestations of patriarchal oppression of spirit and identity. The imposition of Christianity onto First Nations peoples also contributed to the denigration of women within their communities as patriarchally determined gender divisions were promoted. A balance between men and women was no longer encouraged within communities, as:

[w]omen became increasingly removed from the ceremonial circle, pushed away from the drum and song, and relegated to the cooking fire and kitchen. The new religion [Christianity] ultimately legitimated gender

distinction in work roles, home responsibilities, child care obligations, education, marriage commitments, political duties, and legal status.

(Wesley-Esquimaux 17)

It is against this history of oppression that Joseph Boyden, Eden Robinson, and Harry Robinson are narrating their stories. In each text, women are powerful individuals, and command respect within their respective communities. Harry Robinson's grandmother was a storyteller in her own right, preserving and perpetuating traditional stories and cultural myths that shaped Harry's ontological and epistemological approach to cosmology. In *Monkey Beach*, Ma-ma-oo uses traditional stories to instruct Lisamarie on how to cope with the "gift" that has come to her as part of a matriarchal inheritance. Because of Ma-ma-oo's stories, Lisamarie no longer sees herself as a "freak" because of her visions and beliefs in a Haisla spiritual world. Instead, they work to write Lisamarie into a lineage of powerful and respected women, and present her with the possibility to carry on an ancient tradition. Annie and Will in *Through Black Spruce* also descend from a lineage of powerful women, extending back to Niska in Boyden's first novel, *Three Day Road*. Niska, who always remained loyal to a traditional way of living, defied efforts of Canadian government to establish her on a reserve, and continued to live off the land as her ancestors did. As the purveyors of traditional knowledge, the elder women in the narratives of each author are largely credited with retaining and reestablishing a relationship with tribal spirituality and epistemologies while also reclaiming the power and respect denied to women by a history of colonialism.

CHAPTER TWO:

Myth in Modern Times: Exploring Cannibalism in the Compromised Contexts of
Contemporary Consumer Culture

In his poem “WIHTIKOW WANDERING,” from the collection entitled *Songs to Kill a Wihtikow*, Cree poet Neal McLeod reimagines the whitikow, or windigo⁶, a traditional figure from Cree and Ojibwa cosmology, in a contemporary urban setting. Invoking the voices of the storytellers, “the Old People, the poets,” (7) from his own community, McLeod explores the ways in which “[o]ld stories find new places” (9):

my body
has also known
the fire of *wihtikow*
bingo caller gives false hope
white johns
circle the wagons of families
cops who drive brothers
to cold places
wihtikow wanders
in the grey, concrete forest. (23)

Traditionally known as a giant cannibalistic monster, the windigo was seen as an especially threatening presence during the long winter months in Northern Ontario when food became scarce. The windigo could affect a community by preying on its inhabitants or on the wildlife that provided them with their winter diet, thereby imposing desperate starvation conditions upon isolated villages; the windigo, however, could infect an

⁶ Various spellings for windigo include wihtikow, witiko and weendigo, but for the purpose of this essay I will use “windigo,” which is the spelling used in Joseph Boyden’s *Through Black Spruce*

individual, for it was also seen as “the spirit of excess,” which could “captivate or enslave anyone too preoccupied with sleep or work or play or drink or any pursuit or occupation” (Johnston *Heritage* 167).

In light of these two interpretations of the windigo’s cannibalistic appetites, for McLeod the windigo, like many other figures from Cree cosmology, is not a static character found only in the literary and ethnographic collections of Cree “mythology,” but instead has the potential to grow and evolve to reflect the modern settings in which he and his Cree and First Nations “brothers” find themselves. The windigo in “WIHTIKOW WANDERING” has left the cold, densely-forested north and moved south to the densely populated “concrete forest” where the threat it poses is no longer confined to literal consumption but spreads instead into corruption, excessive material consumption, and neocolonial Canadian attitudes towards assimilation, a pertinent metaphysical interpretation of contemporary cannibalism. The cannibalistic windigo, therefore, becomes a powerful figure drawn from Indigenous story through which to explore neocolonial attitudes and the compromised contexts of modern Indigenous life in communities across Canada after they had been subjected to a legacy of imperialism and colonialism.

In the words of Neal McLeod, this chapter, then, is about old stories finding new places. Storytelling allows for the reconceptualization and evolution of certain spiritual figures in Haisla, Okanagan, and Ojibwa-Cree cosmology which, in turn, allows for a reinterpretation of the master narratives that currently define Canada’s history and identity. As McLeod suggests, “[n]ot only can the narrative survive, but these narratives

provide the basis for an anti-colonial political imagination that struggles to preserve the Indigenous political system and identity” (*Narrative* 78). In this chapter, I intend to explore cannibalism and other forms of transgressive consumption through the spirit of the windigo as represented in *Through Black Spruce* and invoked in the spiritual figures of the b’gwus in *Monkey Beach* and the *spatla* Harry Robinson’s narratives. This first requires an exploration, however, into the history of cannibalism and the windigo, in order to frame the contemporary (post-colonial) discourse surrounding these subjects and explore the different ways cannibalism and windigo narratives have been interpreted and adapted by Euro-Canadian settler society and by Indigenous communities. Far from being antiquated myths, the windigo and similar figures from Okanagan and Haisla cosmology have been kept alive through the oral tradition and its invocations within contemporary literature. These work to subvert colonial views of Indigenous peoples as primitive and savage in order to explore the neocolonial attitudes are at the heart of the compromised contexts of modern Indigenous life in communities across Canada.

Role Reversal: A History of Cannibalism

There seem to be few topics that have garnered more recent critical and scholarly attention and experienced a more drastic reinterpretation than cannibalism. Indeed, some have suggested that cannibalism is “one of the most important topics in cultural criticism today” (Lindenbaum 476; see also Kilgour 1990). While some recorded instances of cannibalism may reflect actual events, the vast majority of these accounts are considered to be discredited narratives that say less about the gastronomical practices of the

Indigenous peoples encountered during the seafaring voyages of European explorers, and more about promoting a vision of the “savage/primitive Other” that became central to the construction of a “civilized” European identity.

Believed to be part of the legacy of Columbus’s 1493 voyage to the Caribbean, “[t]he discourse of cannibalism... became a defining feature of the colonial experience in the New World” (Lindenbaum 475). From the sixteenth century onward, popular literature written on and about the cannibal was emerging out of a colonial and imperial European mindset that regarded itself as the pinnacle of human cultural development. European societies had already passed through the first two stages of human progress—savagery and barbarism, as determined by the Enlightenment philosophers—in order to achieve civilization, which they considered to be the third and final stage of social evolution. Encounters with Indigenous peoples of the New World only seemed to encourage confidence in these claims of cultural superiority since cannibalism, a defining feature of savagery and primitivism, featured prominently in accounts coming out of the Americas, Africa, and the Pacific (Hulme 3).

The Age of Enlightenment was also witness to a dramatic reorientation of the way Europeans thought about identity and the individual. As Dror Wahrman suggests in *The Making of the Modern Self: Identity and Culture in Eighteenth-Century England*, instead of being understood as “the collective grouping highlighting whatever a person has in common with others,” identity “became personal, interiorized, essential, even innate. It was made synonymous with self” (276). It is no surprise, therefore, that anxieties about cannibals, which threatened the very subjectivity of the body by literally consuming the

identity of another, were at their height at a time when that individual subjectivity was being invented.

In recent years, cultural and literary criticisms have turned the cannibalism narrative on its head. For centuries, the only accounts of cannibalism were coming from Europeans on colonial and imperial expeditions, and these narratives were written, read, analysed, and interpreted “from within a European or Western tradition little concerned with issues of power and representation” (Lindenbaum 475). It was not until well into the twentieth century that a counter-narrative began to emerge, which challenged the traditional notions of the savage cannibal and paved the way for contemporary discourse and debate surrounding anthropophagy⁷. In 1979, Anthropologist William Arens published *The Man-Eating Myth: Anthropology and Anthropophagy*, in which he argues that there is little to no compelling evidence for many of the documented cases of institutionalized cannibalism, including among the people of the Caribbean, from whom

⁷To my knowledge, the one exception to this is James De Mille’s *Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder*, first published in 1888. In this quasi/semi-satirical novel, DeMille presents readers with two narratives: one of a leisure crew of gentlemen out yachting who happen upon the “strange manuscript” floating in the ocean; and the second of Adam More, author of the manuscript, who documents his escape from a “savage” tribe of emaciated, mummy-like cannibals and subsequent acceptance into the society of the Kosekin, with whom he initially identifies after finding among them “manifest signs of cultivation and civilization” (de Mille 63). However, Adam slowly discovers that the Kosekin are, in fact, more akin to the cannibals he initially escaped from. Interpreting the altruistic and overly-generous welcome he receives as a sign of their hospitality, he soon realizes that their goals of self-denial and self-sacrifice has led to them believing that the greatest honour in their society “is to achieve total self-annihilation by being eaten” (Kilgour “Critics” 9). Maggie Kilgour, in an essay entitled “Cannibals and Critics: An Exploration of James de Mille’s *Strange Manuscript*,” goes on to write that “[t]he text thus seems to set up an opposition between Western self-assertion and materialism (represented by the leisure-crew and their continual consumption) and Kosekin self-abnegation and spirituality. The contrast enables a critique of Western consumerism. Yet there is obviously a deeper irony here which undoes the polarity and complicates the satire, for the Kosekin quest for transcendence returns them to sheer materialism. This dream of escaping the flesh ultimately reduces the human to its most material form, food, which identifies it with, rather than freeing it from, the lower physical world. More’s naive reading of the Kosekin as the antithesis of our society is used as a foil, which enables “us” more sophisticated critics to see an identity between the two worlds” (Kilgour “Critics”).

cannibalism got its name (Arens 44). Instead, Arens points to “the association between cannibalism and Western imperialism [which] is impossible to ignore” (Hulme 7). The accusation of cannibalism, the most revealing sign of savagery and primitivism, became the quickest way to justify slavery and the “civilizing” of Indigenous peoples that European colonial and imperial powers depended on to legitimate their claims on foreign lands.

Out of the legacy of *The Man-Eating Myth* arose an entirely new discourse surrounding cannibalism. Initially, cannibalism, seen as an extension of the primitive “Other,” was the subject of a structuralist approach in which it was seen as one half of the self/Other binary. By creating this divide between the West and the rest, European identity began to be conceived of in opposition to that of their colonized subjects (or how they perceived the colonized subject); we, the civilized and controlled, they the primitive and savage cannibals with unrestrained appetites and desires. Around the mid-twentieth century in works such as Arens’, the cannibal narrative experienced a complete reversal, with scholars suggesting that “cannibalism is merely a product of the European imagination, ... a calumny imposed by European colonisers to justify their outrages... [and] a tool of Empire” (Hulme 3). Many scholars have since agreed that “this version is in danger of oversimplifying almost as much as the once hegemonic story it seeks to overturn” (Hulme 3), but that is not to say that it has not brought us closer to explaining the lasting obsession the West has with cannibal narratives.

Currently, much of the scholarship on cannibalism is emerging from the fields of postcolonial studies and literary criticism. Heading this shift is Maggie Kilgour and her

book *From Communion to Cannibalism: An Anatomy of Metaphors of Incorporation*, in which she looks at the use of cannibalism as a trope, “of which imperialism is just one manifestation. The most extreme image of the subhuman,” she writes, “is intensely revealing of a culture’s vision of what it means to be human and of its appetites both spiritual and material” (Kilgour, “Foreword” viii). Kilgour points out that anxieties about transgressive forms of consumption still exist, but have manifested themselves elsewhere. Kilgour reads cannibalism as an act of appropriation, “a nostalgia for a state of total incorporation” (*Communion* 5). She suggests that to achieve the kind of autonomy that the modern individual and the modern nation state desire requires a cannibalistic act of total incorporation, through assimilation, of all differences into one body, or one body politic (Kilgour, *Communion*). While this may seem like a lot of scholarly theorizing, there are still those few (educated though ignorant) scholars who fall into the trap of this sort of neocolonialist thought. Written in 2008, Frances Widdowson and Albert Howard begin their book *Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry: The Deception Behind Indigenous Cultural Preservation* with a chapter entitled “A Story,” a deceptively innocent title for a chapter that proposes a specific, neocolonial approach to Indigenous-Settler relationships which takes much of its inspiration from nineteenth-century conceptions of cultural superiority. “A Story” introduces readers to the Enlightenment terms of cultural evolution-- savagery, barbarism, and civilization-- and suggests that Indigenous societies in Canada had not evolved past the Neolithic, or “barbarism” phase of human development by the time Europeans first made contact (Widdowson and Howard 12). Widdowson and Howard suggest that it is a “misconception” to conclude that this means

Indigenous people are still at this stage of development because of “the number of aboriginal people who have successfully integrated into modern society” (12). However, they go on to make the contentious claim that:

much of the aboriginal participation in modern societies is as *consumers*, not producers. Isolation from economic processes has meant that a number of Neolithic cultural features, including undisciplined work habits, tribal forms of political identification, animistic beliefs, and difficulties in developing abstract reasoning, persist despite hundreds of years of contact (13, *italics mine*).

Not only does this book exude the old preoccupation with social evolution and cultural superiority, but it also demonstrates the old colonialist anxieties over the consumption practices, albeit in a modern guise, of Indigenous peoples. Widdowson and Howard call for incorporation through assimilation as the path to success for Canada’s First Nations people, yet in the same breath they accuse these people of being subhuman because they are not fully “civilized.” The authors fall into age old trap of degrading the Indigenous populations in order to justify and express anxieties over the contemporary colonial/imperial model that is at the heart of capitalism. Anxieties surrounding identity and integrity of the self did not die with the Enlightenment scholars, but have persisted into today’s scholarly discourses. What becomes clear, however, is that even though a 21st century, Eurocentric preoccupation with the figure of the primitive cannibal is still pervasive, it is still the legacy of a colonial monster, in its various contemporary manifestations, threatening to subsume individual and cultural identity, which we must continually resist.

Good Enough to Eat: A History of the Windigo

On the figure of the windigo found in the Ojibway cosmology, Anishinaabe scholar and storyteller Basil Johnston writes of “a man named Weendigo, who lived on the north shores of Lake Nipissing” (165). Weendigo and his family live in prosperity for years until, one day, animals and fish become scarce and his family begins to starve. Weendigo goes out on a failed hunting expedition, and eventually obtains a potion for hunting success (165); he takes the potion and the next day, Weendigo is “astonished at the length of his strides and the speed with which he covered the ground” (166). Coming upon a village, Weendigo turns all the villagers into beavers with three war cries and proceeds to skin and eat them all, with no regard for the starving family he left behind:

[h]e thought only of himself. [However,] what was even more astonishing than the transformation and his appetite was his increase. For the more Weendigo ate, the greater he grew in size and the greater was his hunger. Instead of alleviating his hunger, Weendigo, by his very act of eating, actually fostered more and greater hunger. (166)

When the hunter Megis returns to find his village devastated by the greedy appetite of the windigo monster, he tracks down and slays Weendigo who, though he remains physically dead, continues to live on as “the spirit of excess,” waiting to entrap anyone too self-absorbed or preoccupied with unproductive pursuits (167).

This story of the windigo is unique for a number of reasons. While much has been written on the windigo, it is surprisingly difficult to find stories told by Indigenous Cree and Ojibway storytellers, since many of the anthologies and literature on this figure have been written on or collected by anthropologists, based on the recorded accounts of early

explorers, missionaries, and ethnographers to Canada's north. One of the few collections of windigo narratives comes from John Robert Colombo and features almost exclusively second- or third-hand accounts recorded by European or Euro-Canadian explorers, missionaries, and settlers. These stories offer a very different interpretation of what the windigo is and what it means, and it is important to first explore these differences, as they will come to inform our reading of Joseph Boyden, Harry Robinson, and Eden Robinson, and aid us in our understanding of why the windigo figure is so important to our understanding of contemporary literature emerging out of First Nations communities.

The windigo has its own unique history, beginning within a First Nations tradition. While this much can be agreed upon, the windigo has been given many faces and been treated to a number of interpretations since contact was made between white Settlers and the primarily Cree and Ojibway peoples of the northern sub-arctic regions of Canada, many of which are deeply revealing of the discrepancies between Eurocentric and First Nations ways of being and knowing.

The windigo is a cannibalistic spirit-figure born out of Cree and Ojibway cosmology. While there are many different narratives in which the windigo takes various forms, the windigo is generally considered by Euro-Canadian writers to pose two threats: the “fear of being eaten by one, and fear of becoming one” (Atwood, qtd in Goldman 168). In these accounts, the windigo in the first instance is a giant cannibalistic monster which haunts the cold forests of the Canadian subarctic. Most stories about this form of windigo concentrate on its superhuman strength and heart of ice, which must be melted if the spirit of the windigo is to be completely destroyed (see Norman; Johnston, *Ojibway*;

Colombo). However, the most ubiquitous characteristic of the windigo, and the one most feared by isolated communities struggling to survive the long, cold winters, is its insatiable hunger and need to consume everything around it, sometimes becoming so ravenous that it chews off its own lips. In all of the stories collected from Cree elders and translated by Howard Norman in *Where the Chill Comes From: Cree Windigo Tales and Journeys*, the common threads which knit each story into a narrative whole are a cold winter setting, starvation in the community brought on by poor hunting conditions, and a windigo figure which is either responsible for causing hunger in the community by “starving them out” (66) or which threatens to eat individuals providing for the community. Basil Johnston’s narrative also has in common a cold environment setting, from Lake Nipissing to James Bay, the looming threat of starvation in the community, and a windigo who devours the villagers. However, in Johnston’s narrative, and (perhaps less obviously) in the narratives collected by Norman⁸, the windigo is more than monster horror story. As Johnston suggests in the Preface to *Ojibway Heritage*, “[i]f the Native People and their heritage are to be understood, it is their beliefs, insights, concepts, ideals, values, attitudes, and codes that must be studied” (7). The traditional narratives recorded by Johnston and Norman do just this, warning against selfishness, excess, and apathy towards neighbours which threatens the integrity of the individual and the community. In “The Frozen-Lake-Heart Windigo,” Norman records how one man in a hunting party “was known to tell many things. He talked a lot. It was said, ‘You need to

⁸It should be mentioned that Norman is of European descent, translating stories told to him by Cree elders. While the translations may be literal, the stories may not contain the same accuracy and cultural and social insights when taken out of the context of the Cree language.

get all your talking done before sitting to a meal with him, because you'll only get to listen!" (100). It is this man who eventually succumbs to the windigo spirit and threatens the success of his hunting party. In Johnston's story, the transformed "Weendigo's hunger superseded everything else, even his family and village. His need had first to be served and satisfied. In James Bay, Weendigo ate and ate, killed and killed" (*Heritage* 166). Even after Weendigo's death, the spirit of the windigo lives on in humans, manifesting itself as excessive desires and appetites (Johnston *Heritage* 167). The threat of the windigo, therefore, is not just an external one, not the cold nor the fear of starvation, but also stems from the temptation to put individual desires above the needs of the community which, ironically, leads to a loss of the cultural identity that defines the individual.

From the time of contact to well into the twentieth centuries, however, these windigo narratives were ignored by the Europeans who interacted with Indigenous communities of Northern Canada. The emphasis for these explorers, missionaries, settlers, and subsequent anthropologists who studied their accounts, was, unsurprisingly, predicated on the cannibalism aspect of the windigo stories they heard. In his collection of windigo stories and accounts, John Robert Colombo argues that the first references to the windigo can be found in letters and reports written by seventeenth-century Jesuit missionary Paul Le Jeune. The "evidence" that Colombo finds in the Jesuit's writings are in reference to *Atchen*, which he argues "is the word used among the Montagnais-Naskapi of Northern Quebec for the Windigo" (7), and reports of an outbreak of cannibalism by men:

afflicted with neither lunacy, hypochondria, nor frenzy' but have a combination of all these species of disease... This makes them so ravenous for human flesh that they pounce upon women, children, and even upon men, like veritable werewolves, and devour them voraciously, without being able to appease or glut their appetite- ever seeking fresh prey, and the more greedily the more they eat. (qtd. in Colombo 7-8)

While echoes of traditional forms of the windigo narrative can be heard in the description of greed and an insatiable appetite related by Le Jeune, it is the savagery and psychological state of the people affected by this “disease” that becomes the focus of his report. As Neal McLeod reminds us in *Songs to Kill a Wihtikow*, “[m]issionaries tried to scare people with these stories. They tried to make *wihtikow* into the ultimate darkness” (9). The windigo, appropriated by colonial culture, thereby became a way to transform the traditional beliefs and values of Indigenous communities as represented in narrative into something frightening and alien.

By the twentieth century, the idea of a “windigo psychosis” had become firmly entrenched in Western psychological discourse and ethnographic studies of Cree and Ojibway societies. After Rev. John M. Cooper published an article in 1933, entitled “The Cree Witiko Psychosis,” which interprets the windigo as a “mental disturbance... characterized by (1) a craving for human flesh, and (2) a delusion of transformation into a Witiko who has a heart of ice or who vomits ice” (20), “windigo psychosis” dominated the discourse on the windigo until Louis Marano’s 1981 publication of *Windigo Psychosis: The Anatomy of an Emic-Etic Confusion*. In this dissertation, Marano suggests that the windigo psychosis never existed, and that it can instead be read as

anthropologists' projection of Eurocentric values onto Indigenous cultures they study, in much the same way that early explorers projected their cannibalism fantasies onto the peoples they encountered in the new world.

While Marano's conclusions remain controversial, he has since prompted a departure from Eurocentric interpretations of the windigo, demonstrated in the book *Columbus and Other Cannibals: The Wetiko Disease of Exploitation, Imperialism, and Terrorism*, by First Nations author Jack Forbes, as well as in Deborah Root's *Cannibal Culture: Art, Appropriation, and the Commodification of Difference*, both of which argue that the windigo can currently be interpreted as a "Western or European model of society" and "the unchecked will to consume that is at the heart of Western mentality..." Forbes describes the Western ethos as a highly contagious disease with hideous effects whose sufferers are nevertheless highly rewarded in this culture" (Root 10-11). This view of the "windigo psychosis" as part of an epistemological system rather than a psychological illness or as simply a metaphor is a crucial first step in the framing of my subsequent discussion on the windigo in contemporary First Nations literature. However, while Root and Forbes are quick to locate the circulation of the windigo in a "Western ethos," it is necessary to remember that the windigo first emerged from an Indigenous narrative history, which is central to an understanding of how the windigo functions in Boyden's *Though Black Spruce*, Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach*, and Harry Robinson's Okanagan narratives.

The Windigo in Contemporary Literature

In the essay, “Is That All There Is? Tribal Literature,” Basil Johnston laments the fact that “[m]yths, legends, and songs have not been regenerated and set in modern terms to earn immortalization in poetry, dramatization in plays, or romanticization in novels” (107). One reason this “tribal literature,” as Johnston calls it, is having difficulty finding its place within modern literary contexts may be because much of the literature is part of an oral tradition which, by its very nature, has not remained static over the years. “Tribal literature” relied on both the skill *and* the experience of the storyteller, which allowed oral narratives to be “adaptable because they could be revised to meet the changing needs of their societies and, therefore, could evolve as their contexts changed. Thus,” as Jo-Ann Episkenew asserts in *Taking Back our Spirits*, “stories were central to the functioning of Indigenous societies” (4). While Episkenew writes of these adaptations occurring in the past, I would contend that contemporary authors like Eden Robinson, Harry Robinson, and Joseph Boyden are doing just this. By invoking the oral tradition, contemporary (written) Indigenous literature demonstrates the plasticity and fluidity which allows for specific spiritual figures of each tradition—the windigo in Boyden’s *Through Black Spruce*, the B’gwus and in *Monkey Beach* by Eden Robinson, and the *spatla* in Harry Robinson’s transcribed collections— to adapt and evolve into a contemporary setting. The windigo, and similar figures in the works of Eden Robinson and Harry Robinson, therefore allows contemporary Indigenous literature to act as a counter-narrative to the “myth of the new Canadian nation-state, which valorizes the settlers but which sometimes misrepresents and more often excludes Indigenous peoples” (Episkenew 2).

Through the windigo, regenerated into the compromised social contexts of many Indigenous peoples today, whether on reserves or in the city, the myth of savagery and cannibalism historically projected onto Indigenous peoples by the settler communities is deflected back onto the accusers in order to reflect the true savagery of a colonial legacy, the manifestation of its effects today, and the cannibalistic nature of a neocolonial assimilation project. And, while I agree with Cynthia Sugars who, like Jack Forbes and Deborah Root, suggests that the windigo “psychosis” is now understood as “a metaphor for the violence of imperialism and the sickness at the heart of the modern capitalist world” (79), I believe that this approach to the windigo, and the spiritual figures of other traditions, is still moving us away from the tradition from which the windigo has come. Instead of seeing the windigo only as a literary device—a metaphor—I suggest that we approach this figure, and others like it, as a “socio-pedagogical,” epistemological, and ontological tool which, like “tribal literature,” is used to “change society by educating the settler readers about the *Indigenous perspective* of Canadian society” (Episkenew 17, *italics mine*). In order to ensure that this Indigenous perspective is promoted, it is necessary to always be aware of the cultural and spiritual tradition from whence these figures came. The windigo and other figures are part of a spiritual tradition established well before the arrival of an imperial and colonial European presence which has come to shape Canada’s contemporary political, social, and cultural environments and, as such, are part of the “large, intergenerational collective memory” that Neal McLeod calls “narrative memory”⁹ (8). Narrative memory, which includes the accentuation of details

⁹ See Chapter One for a lengthier discussion on Neal McLeod’s concept of “narrative memory.”

and incorporation of the storyteller's experience in order to produce a fluidity unique to the Indigenous narrative tradition, allows for the adaptation of figures like the windigo, B'gwus, and the *spatla* to contemporary settings and for their regeneration in contemporary literature.

The figure of the windigo in Joseph Boyden's *Through Black Spruce* emerges not only from an Ojibway-Cree tradition of narrative memory, but also from the narrative memory that extends beyond the novel itself to its prequel, *Three Day Road*. Will Bird and his niece Annie Bird, both of *Through Black Spruce*, descend from a legacy of windigo killers whose ancestry is traced in *Three Day Road* through Will's father, Xavier and his great-aunt Niska, to her father. Niska, like Xavier and Will and Annie in *Through Black Spruce*, narrates alternating chapters using a technique reminiscent of the oral tradition. First, she reflects upon her present situation, and then searches her memory for a story that will allow her to better understand what she is experiencing. At the beginning of the chapter "Noohtaawiy: My Father," Niska has reunited with her nephew, Xavier, who has returned from the trenches of the first world war addicted to morphine and missing a leg. While she recognizes that the morphine is "a part of what's killing him," she worries that "something far worse is consuming Xavier from the inside" (32). The pain and fear that Xavier brought back with him from Europe makes Niska "think something I haven't thought about in a long time" (33), and she goes on to relate to Xavier the story of her father, chief of their village, who also held the role of windigo killer. Her story is reminiscent of the traditional narratives of Johnston and Norman: poor hunting conditions during a particularly harsh winter led to starvation conditions in the

village. A young man, his wife, and their child depart on a hunting expedition, but only the wife and child return, “flushed and healthy-looking,” with a pack of what the village discovers is the flesh of her husband (40). The woman and her child descend into madness, and “the children in the camp stopped sleeping, cried in fear, no longer felt their hunger” (41). The integrity of their community is threatened by the presence of the windigo, and it fell to Niska’s father to re-establish the equilibrium and order. After killing the windigo mother and child, Niska recalls how “[s]omething unwanted had left us,” and within days, hunters returned with enough moosemeat to feed the village and winter retreated (42).

This story eventually comes to play an important role in subsequent events in *Three Day Road* and in *Through Black Spruce*. In *Three Day Road*, Xavier recalls his aunt’s story and words: “*Do what you have to*” (340). In the trenches of World War One, he realizes that his best friend has been caught up in the madness of war; Elijah tells Xavier that he has “found the one thing I am truly talented at, and that is killing men. I do not need food when I have this” (320). Xavier recognizes Elijah’s transformation into something “inhuman,” something that literally feeds off of the death of others. He has become the windigo of his aunt’s stories. Niska’s experiences, and her advice, “*Do what you have to*” (340), resonate with Xavier-- he must shoulder the responsibility Niska’s stories prepared him for and become the next in a long line of windigo killers.

The cannibalistic savagery seems to be a grotesque version of the “savage Indian” stereotype and, through his description of Elijah’s violent and cannibalistic tendencies, Boyden runs the risk of confirming and sustaining this stereotype. Elijah’s descent into

the madness of the *windigo* is, however, inextricably linked to the colonial legacy and the violence and atrocities of the war, and his transformation is encouraged to completion by a group of French soldiers, one of whom tells Elijah to “Do what my people taught your people a long time ago. Take the scalp of your enemy as proof. Take a bit of him to feed you” (204). Boyden thus complicates the traditional stereotypes because “the savagery associated with aboriginal identity becomes transfigured as a result of the contagion of the non-Native world” (Sugars 81). Surrounded by the brutality of war, the windigo as “savage Indian” becomes inverted and the convergence of traditional Ojibwa tales with the reality of trench warfare allows for an alternative, Indigenous understanding of Elijah’s actions and transformation that relies on narrative memory and the combined experience of ancestral knowledge.

The evolution of the windigo in *Three Day Road* and its adaptation to environments beyond its origins, both ontologically and physically, continue to be shaped by the experiences and interpretations of events by the descendants of Niska and Xavier in *Through Black Spruce*. In this novel, Boyden again brings the windigo to life, but this time he does so in an entirely contemporary setting, beginning with Will in Moosonee, Northern Ontario and then “moving south” with Annie, first to Toronto, then on to Montreal and finally New York City.

In their reliance on traditional stories and their ability to recognize the windigo, Will and Annie, like their ancestors before them, are both able to look beyond themselves in order to recognize what has become a threat to their community, to the survival of traditional values, and to a strong and cohesive cultural identity. In Moosonee, Will has

seen the many ways in which the traditions of his ancestors have been threatened. As a child, his parents were forced to send Will to a residential school, which Will remembers being “white-washed and scrubbed clean with wood soap and the greasy sweat of Indian kids” (15). Considered one of the most harmful offences and enduring legacies committed by the Canadian government against the First Nations peoples, it is now recognized that residential schools suppressed cultures, languages, and traditional spiritual practices, consuming traditional cultural identities through the pressure on young Indigenous children to assimilate into Euro-Western culture. While this is the legacy that Will is forced to contend with, he recognizes that there is a new, indirectly related threat now looming over the community:

Marius’ family started as bootleggers, sneaking whisky and vodka onto the dry reserves north of us by snowmobile in winter. [...] In the last few years, the Netmakers discovered that cocaine and crystal meth were easier to smuggle up, and they are responsible for the white powder falling across James Bay reserves and covering many of the younger ones in its embrace. (22)

These two destructive forces, residential school and substance abuse, are tragically and intimately related within First Nations communities in Canada. It is now acknowledged that the resulting emotional and spiritual trauma experienced by First Nations children at residential schools often led, directly or indirectly, to perpetuated cycles of substance abuse, sexual abuse, suicide, and violence in those and subsequent generations (Castricano 802). Will recognizes this relationship as being deeply connected within his own family and community: “The big white building that I thought was finally gone

came back into my nightmares again when I began to contemplate the Netmaker clan. What Marius and his friends brought into our community was more destructive than what the *wemestikushu* [white man] brought with their nuns and priests” (187). By connecting the “big white building” of the residential school that many of the older generation experienced with the drugs being smuggled and abused by the younger generation, Boyden draws our attention to the ways in which trauma of oppression is perpetuated within the community.

According to Erica-Irene Daes, all forms of oppression, no matter where or against whom they occur, are a form of spiritual death (5). In *Marius*, Will recognizes that this “spiritual death” has occurred, that Marius “was missing something that the rest of us have. He is what the old ones would call *windigo*” (165); Marius loses his connection to the spirit of the community through his own selfishness. Like the windigo of traditional Ojibway-Cree narratives, what causes one to “go windigo” may be external, but the threat it poses is an internal one, internal to both self and community. Marius has been corrupted by the most destructive manifestation of consumer culture—drugs, substance abuse, and the insatiable greed for power and money— and has selfishly brought it into his community, where it can feed off of the historical trauma of his people, furthering the assault on their cultural and spiritual integrity.

Like Xavier in *Three Day Road*, Annie’s own interactions with the windigo occur beyond the community of her family and friends. Sharing the novel’s narrative with Will, Annie relates to her uncle how she spent months searching for her sister, the beautiful model Suzanne, first in Toronto, then Montreal and finally New York City. Suzanne left

Moosonee with her boyfriend Gus, the brother of Marius, to “go south,” where she landed a successful modeling career, but, as Annie discovers in her search, the couple quickly find themselves being consumed by drugs and the dark side of the fashion world’s consumer culture, battling the same monster they left in Moosonee.

Initially, Annie enjoys the attention she receives as the sister of the missing Suzanne, but quickly realizes that there is something sinister just below the beautiful surfaces of the people and lifestyle Suzanne surrounded herself with. Arriving only with the intention of finding her sister, Annie is quickly pulled into the world of modeling by the deceptive Violet, a friend of Suzanne’s, and their modeling agent. As she sits in the agent’s office, looking over photos from her first photo shoot, she recalls that “[t]his is the same man who handed me an envelope stuffed with Suzanne’s money not so long ago. To buy me off. Now, I think he is ready to sell me” (151). Descending into the belly of the beast, Annie quickly finds her own body transformed into a commodified object advertised for consumption in fashion magazines. However, the longer Annie spends in New York, the more frequently she is visited by visions of Suzanne: “my dreams of my sister are of her pretty face frozen” (109). In another vision, Annie sees Suzanne “more gaunt than I’ve ever seen her. She’s starving herself. I once believed our people could never purposely starve themselves. Our winter world did it for us” (160). Through her dream-visions, Annie is clearly drawing on the traditional windigo narratives of her ancestors, in which freezing temperatures and starvation were the prime windigo conditions. By incorporating herself and her sister into their own windigo narrative, she is

drawing on knowledge of ancestors in order to recognize forces threatening her sister and the integrity of their family.

It is in Danny, the biker from Trois Rivieres who, Violet tells Annie, “scores us the clean stuff,” (200), that Annie recognizes the manifestation of the windigo that has caused so much trouble for her Suzanne and Gus. In each of Annie’s encounters with Danny, she is again and again struck by his malevolent smile and that “one of his front teeth is grey” (137). This repeated emphasis on Danny’s smile and teeth aligns him with the mouth, the literal site of consumption. Danny maintains his position within the modeling world because Soleil, their leader, “finds it sexy and frightening to know any of them [biker gang members], and so she lets them come” (236). As a windigo, Danny thrives off of the greed of others, as well as his own insatiable greed for power, which he maintains through violence. He is, Annie discovers, the reason Suzanne is missing. While Suzanne was slowly being consumed by the world of models and fashion, Gus found himself caught up in Danny’s drug ring, consumed by his addiction to crack cocaine and indebted to Danny, for which Gus pays with his life.

In one of her dream-visions, Annie clearly sees the connection between the two worlds inhabited by Suzanne the model and Gus the drug dealer: she watches “as Soleil in a white, white gown emerges from behind a dumpster. She has something in her hand. A credit card. Danny comes out from behind the dumpster, too, catches up to Soleil, and the two skip hand in hand down the alley toward Kenya. They plan on slitting her throat with the card” (257-8). While she is no longer in the frozen North, Annie has found herself in a world controlled and governed by the windigo. In recognizing the windigo in

her new environment, Annie maintains her connections to an Oji-Cree narrative memory and way of knowing, and is able to recognize the malignant forces at work which threaten to pull both her family and community apart. As she comes to the realization that she is in danger of being completely subsumed by the insatiable greed for power and money that is the driving force behind Danny and Soleil, Annie is able to recognize that the “cure” for this form of windigo sickness is maintaining a connection to her community, renouncing the selfish gains of an individual for the spiritual support of a long and trusted tradition. As Annie leaves New York for good, she has a vision: “[a] hundred generations that came before me wait, huddling in the cold. They look at me, I think. They look up at me, but they don’t judge or laugh. They just watch me, trying to flag a cab on the slushy curb” (278). Just as Annie can recognize the threat of the windigo, she can also see that which can counter its destructive powers. Her ancestors “don’t judge or laugh”; instead, they rally around Annie, their presence representing the spiritual support within which she can realize her true potential. Whereas the windigo spirit separates its victims from others in the mad pursuit of consumption, a spiritual community protects its people by drawing them into its shared values¹⁰. By participating in these shared values, individuals discover a sense of relatedness that allows them to draw from a spiritual strength that exists outside of themselves. Unlike the selfish and self-indulgent nature of cannibalistic windigo, which threatens to tear apart Annie’s family and community, spirituality is

¹⁰ The potential tension that this presents with regards to Maggie Kilgour’s notion of consumptive communion (see *From Communion to Cannibalism: An Anatomy of Metaphors of Incorporation*) will be addressed at the end of this chapter, in my discussion on “grateful consumption.”

inherently collective and provides the foundation for healthy and well-balanced individuals united in their concern for a communal well-being.

While the windigo has experienced an increasing amount of critical and literary attention in the past decade, there are First Nations spiritual figures from other cultural traditions which assume a similar role in contemporary literature. For Harry Robinson, the appearance of Okanagan figures in contemporary settings is a defining feature of the stories he tells. In “Coyote Makes a Deal with the King of England,” Robinson recalls the time when Coyote met with the King of England in order to form a treaty that would protect the rights of Canada’s Indigenous peoples. Another story, “Coyote Plays a Dirty Trick,” recounts how “Coyote’s son was the first man on the moon!” (*Heart* 92). One of Robinson’s great skills is his ability to effortlessly weave figures from traditional Okanagan stories into contemporary settings, allowing these narratives to provide a counter-story to the dominant Eurocentric readings of history.

After years of visiting Robinson at his ranch, Wendy Wickwire, the transcriber of his stories, began to recognize that Harry was not just telling stories at random, but choosing them very carefully; Wickwire “reflected on how passionately he had launched our project with his stories about whites and how quickly I had dismissed these as anomalies” (455). Harry, like any good storyteller, was very aware of his audience and knew that it would take time for the lessons in his stories to be appreciated. He told Wickwire to listen to the tapes of his stories a few times to “[s]ee if you can see something more about it. Kind of plain, but it's pretty hard to tell you for you to know right now. Takes time. And then you will see” (Robinson, qtd. in Wickwire 455). Harry’s

stories do take time, and are layered with multiple levels of meaning, and they are meant to speak directly to us as readers, suggesting that the narrative is never fully finished, but is instead an evolving and adapting on-going process. In this way, Harry is inviting us into the stories and the storytelling process, and our own participation draws us together into a community formed around the telling and retelling of these stories.

In “A *Spatla* Was Killed by Rabbit and Chipmunk,” Robinson introduces us to the *spatla*, a gigantic cannibalistic monster, similar to the windigo, which lives off of the flesh of humans but especially enjoys tender babies, which it collect in a big pack on its back (*Stories* 35-6). As the title indicates, Harry sets out to tell a traditional story about how cunning Rabbit and Chipmunk, though both small, were able to kill one of these cannibals. Harry, however, does not get far into this narrative before he interrupts himself to relate an event that he had witnessed at the rodeo a few years before, in which white rodeo clowns appeared dressed as *spatla*:

I see the white people,
 they make a show, like that *spatla*.
Just how it was told for the stories.
One man, they make some kind of pack...
And they walks around in the ring
[...]
A lot of people, white and Indian,
 they don't know what this is
 when they see these mans around...
And I did see.
But I knew that's *spatla*. (36-7).

Initially, this digression may appear to be one of those “anomalies” about whites that Wickwire was quick to dismiss. However, if we take Harry’s advice to “see something more about it,” and consider the audience that Harry is relating his story to, Harry’s short aside about the cannibalistic *spatla* at the rodeo is anything but anomalous.

In the Canadian west, the rodeo has become a cultural institution, with events like the Calgary Stampede attracting over a million visitors each year (“Stampede”). While bucking, riding, and roping events, performed by cowboys (and cowgirls) to demonstrate skill and prowess, are the big attractions at any rodeo, the rodeo clowns are there to provide the audience with interim entertainment like trick roping and “bull fighting” (Stoeltje 158). The rodeo clown is also present in the ring during the bucking events to excite the bull or to distract it from the cowboy once he has fallen off or dismounted (Stoeltje). But why do these men (rodeo clowns are typically men) *dress* like clowns? I would suggest that the costume of the rodeo clown represents performance, and the performative aspects of the rodeo; otherwise, “without the clown the event is simply a competition or demonstration” (Stoeltje 160). Through the performative quality that the rodeo clown introduces into the rodeo, “[t]he acts of riding the trained horse and roping, therefore, reflect the desired order of the range. The bucking events represent the disorderly, the not yet domesticated” (Stoeltje 161). It is, arguably, through the presence of the rodeo clown that we recognize the implicit purpose of the rodeo, which is to celebrate the taming of Canada’s “wild west,” highlighting the skills of the cowboys who descend from those first men responsible for bringing “civilization” to the prairies. However, as Jan Penrose suggests in “When All the Cowboys are Indians: The Nature of

Race in All-Indian Rodeo,” the “[r]odeo was used to help entrench a cowboy/Indian dichotomy”:

Over time, rodeo has evolved into a popular cultural event that is central to Euro-Canadian views and celebrations of Euro-Canadians' history in western Canada. The common portrayal of rodeo events as contests between “man” and “beast” has strong links with Euro-Canadians' renditions of their pioneering past, in which civilization struggled to tame the wilderness of the “New World.” What is less commonly acknowledged, however, is that Indians have frequently been constructed and treated as part of the nature that Euro-Canadians sought to subdue and exploit. (687)

That the *spatla* at the rodeo in Harry's story are white-- presumably Euro-Canadian-- rodeo clowns dressed up in costume, seems to be no coincidence in a collection of stories that are full of Indigenous counter-narratives. No longer found in the context of traditional narratives set in what Robinson calls the “imbellable” time, or ““way back” during the time of the ‘animal people’” (*Stories* 36), these white *spatla* represent the more immediate threat of “cultural cannibalism” posed by a legacy of colonialism and an imperialist project keen on possessing lands in the New World. When explorers and settlers arrived in Canada, they saw it as *terra nullius*, empty land free for the taking, ignoring the fact that Indigenous societies were already a firmly established presence. Robinson's digression about white men dressed as *spatla* at the rodeo appears to be a reminder about the effect these “white” presences on both the land and the people. In the same way the *spatla* of Robinson's story goes on to cannibalize the animals of the forests, the settler population cannibalized the ecology of the west, their firearm technology and

seemingly insatiable greed responsible for the disappearance of buffalo herds which in turn destroyed Indigenous ways of living that relied upon this animal, threatening thousands of people with starvation (Penrose 690). Alien diseases were also introduced into Indigenous populations by European settlers, whether intentionally or not, thriving off of bodies that had never experienced these illnesses and thus did not have an immunological resistance built up; the result was the decimation of entire communities across the country (Penrose 690). In the end, the easiest way to dispossess Indigenous populations of land in the west, as well as in the rest of Canada, was domination through assimilation, as a “means of eliminating ‘native’ as a social category, as well as any land rights attached to it” (Harris 174). Harry’s insertion of the *spatla* narrative works to “untame” the spectacle of the rodeo, acting as a kind of interruption to the rodeo’s traditional discourse of how the west was “won” by taming nature and “Indians.”

For Lisamarie and her family in Eden Robinson’s *Monkey Beach*, the implications of the colonial legacy are still being felt by the Haisla community of Kitamaat, British Columbia. Through Lisamarie’s own interactions with narrative memory and figures from Haisla cosmology, she is able to recognize and begin to transcend this legacy. Like Will Bird in *Through Black Spruce*, Mick and Trudy, uncle and aunt to Lisamarie in Robinson’s novel, are part of the last generation to attend residential schools, and throughout the novel we see their attempts to cope with the violence and abuse that they experienced there. While Lisamarie is not subjected to the same overt forms of institutional violence, she does experience another, more subtle form of institutional oppression. This oppression comes through Lisamarie’s own experiences with the stories

she hears that challenge the cohesion of traditional Indigenous communities. These stories, however, are relayed through the government-sanctioned history textbooks: the teacher “had forced us to read a book that said that the Indians on the northwest coast of British Columbia had killed and eaten people as religious sacrifices. My teacher had made us each read a paragraph out loud. When my turn came, I sat there shaking, absolutely furious” (68). Not only is Lisamarie subjected to this more subtle form of cultural degradation in the classroom, but she is made to speak the words out loud, giving voice to them as though they were true. The traditional cultural and spiritual beliefs of her ancestors are primitivized, distorted, and relegated to the ranks of superstitious beliefs about savage cannibals. Lisamarie counters her teacher’s lesson, claiming “it’s all lies... Ma-ma-oo told me it was just pretend, the eating people, like drinking Christ’s blood at Communion,” prompting her teacher to respond that Lisamarie does not know what she is talking about (68). It is not, however, just these stories that Lisamarie must navigate herself and her own cultural identity through, but also the stories that come from within Haisla tradition, evolving with the experiences of each generation.

As children, a favourite story of Lisamarie’s, as well as her brother Jimmy, was that of the B’gwus, a sasquatch-like figure that inhabited the forests of coastal British Columbia. Her father’s version of the b’gwus portrays it as a violent, bloodthirsty monster, and the story ends with one trapper finding his hunting partner “battered, bloody and most definitely dead” (8), killed at the hands of these beasts. Hearing the b’gwus howl all around him, the trapper is lucky to escape with his life. This, however, bothers Ma-ma-oo, who, “every time Dad launched into his version... punctuated his gory

descriptions with, ‘That’s not how it happened’” (8). Ma-ma-oo’s version is “less gruesome, with... the first trapper just seeing the b’gwus crossing a glacier, getting scared and running back to camp” (9), and when Lisamarie’s father chides his mother that “‘It’s just a story’” (8), Ma-ma-oo is particularly offended. Ma-ma-oo approves of neither the sensationalized treatment given to a traditional narrative by her son, nor the flippancy with which he treats it. However, Lisamarie’s father is part of the generation sent to residential schools, indoctrinated, like Lisamarie, by Euro-Canadian narratives of history and forced to assimilate, which meant abandoning traditional Haisla knowledge, beliefs, values, and stories like that of the b’gwus. Instead of drawing power and understanding from these narratives, Lisamarie and her brother are encouraged by their father’s versions, influenced by his own experience, to distance themselves from tradition and fear the figures on which their cultural cosmology is founded.

The violent and cannibalistic nature of the b’gwus in the father’s version also reflects the violence that many of his generation were subjected to as part of the residential school experience. Lisamarie’s aunt- her father’s sister Trudy- and their friend Josh were both molested by nuns and priests who ran the schools, as Lisamarie finds out from Trudy: “‘Facts of life, girly. There were tons of priests in the residential schools, tons of fucking matrons and helpers that ‘helped’ themselves to little kids just like you’” (255). The stories that father tells about the b’gwus have evolved from their traditional form to reflect the violence enacted upon his family and friends, which continues to define many of the relationships in their community. The cycle of violence and dysfunction is manifested in the alcoholism of Trudy and perpetuated by Josh, who we

suspect has raped both his niece Karaoke, who aborts his child, and his nephew Pooch, who commits suicide. The legacy of violence in the Haisla community, reflected in Lisamarie's father's reimagining of the b'gwus story, threatens to consume the cultural and spiritual integrity of the community, already claiming lives of the next generation.

Lisamarie becomes entrapped within this cycle of violence when she is raped by a close friend at a party. After this event, her interactions with Haisla spiritual beings intensify, and she is visited by both spirits and by a little red man, whose presence usually forebodes tragedy. Lisamarie begins to sleepwalk at night. Her parents, adhering to a Western understanding of disease and psychology, take Lisa to the hospital "to find out what was wrong" (266). When the doctors fail to explain the cause of her anxiety, Lisa is sent to a psychologist. The therapist, Ms. Jenkins, reads Lisamarie's predicament through a thoroughly Eurocentric perspective, pathologizing her experiences as a psychological coping mechanism. The therapist, like the teacher, has no room for Lisa's stories about ghosts within her own Western-trained understanding of psychological reality. When the therapist suggests that "maybe the ghosts you dream about aren't really ghosts, but... your attempt to deal with death" (273), Lisamarie is, at first, adamant that the ghosts really do exist. Ms. Jenkins however, remains unconvinced, firmly entrenched in the stories which comprise Western philosophy on the nature of reality. While Lisamarie does eventually conform to Ms. Jenkins' epistemological expectations, and admits to seeing ghosts "for attention" (274), she does not tell the therapist that her admission is made at the prompting of the "thing" which entered the office with Ms. Jenkins, "wrapped around her waist as it clung to her like a baby" (273). This "thing," a fleshless

being of skin and bones, attaches itself to Lisamarie and begins “feeding” off of her (274), whispering to Lisamarie what the therapist wants to hear. As Lisamarie repeats the words that satisfy the therapist, she disavows her own beliefs in order to assimilate into Ms. Jenkins’ Euro-Canadian expectations. That Ms. Jenkins cannot see the “thing” speaks to its deep entrenchment in the Western psyche, not aware that her own perspective is shaped by the tradition of Western psychology which “continues to be the main method of trying to understand the problems within Native American country. The frustrating issue in all of these methods is that these researchers are using tools from the very cultural context that has been oppressing Native Americans” (Duran and Duran 99). While we may initially be compelled to read the “thing” as a manifestation of Lisamarie’s psychosis, an alternative interpretation could have us read the ‘thing’ as a manifestation of Ms. Jenkins’ unconscious, trained in the tradition of Western science and narrative, imposing colonial mentalities upon her patients and incorporating them into an ideological body that does not represent their own ways of knowing.

The authors of these three texts are not content, however, to allow the greedy, insatiable, all-consuming hunger of the windigo, *spatla*, and b’gwus to define the existence of the communities on which they write. The windigo and other cannibalistic beings lack a sense of spiritual connectedness and gratitude, wanting only to satisfy their own hunger at the expense of those around them. Joseph Boyden, Harry Robinson, and Eden Robinson respond to the cannibalistic forces at work within each community by highlighting acts of grateful consumption in order to reorient the texts and characters within a system of Indigenous knowing, cultural tradition, and narrative memory. This

concept of grateful consumption is, I would suggest, tied to the Sami philosophy of the gift¹¹. As Rauna Kuokkanen illustrates in the essay “Lahi and Attaldat: The Philosophy of the Gift and Sami Education,” a Sami “worldview of reciprocation [is] characterised by the existence of various deities and spirits of the natural world to whom human beings were required to pay respect and express gratitude” (23). The gifts offered to these spirits and deities were given to thank them for the abundance they had seen in the past, and also to ensure luck in hunting and fishing in the future (Kuokkanen 25). In this perspective, we see that individual consumption is situated within a notion of community that includes more than just human participants. The Sami gift economy reflects a worldview “that recognizes the abundance of the land as gifts that, in turn, are actively acknowledged and reciprocated by various ceremonies and rituals” (Kuokkanen 24). Whereas the windigo alienates individuals from their communities, acts of grateful consumption like the Sami gift economy and those performed in the works of Joseph Boyden, Eden Robinson, and Harry Robinson, demonstrate the authors’ convictions that the individual can only thrive if the community (human, spiritual, and ecological) thrives, which means placing the good of the community before Euro-Canadian capitalist values of expansion of money economy, profit, and private property.

As Annie of *Through Black Spruce* returns home to Moosonee from New York City, she finds herself revisiting memories of time spent with her Uncle Will and

¹¹ The Sami are the Indigenous people who reside in an area that spans from central Norway and Sweden to Russia (Kuokkanen 21). Naturally, Sami cultural practices are unique to the Sami people and their environment and do not, therefore, represent a pan-Indigenous experience. However, there do seem to be similarities in the emphasis that the Sami and other Indigenous groups in Canada place on the importance of gifts and a gift economies to represent a sense of gratitude; as Rauna Kuokkanen suggests, “[i]n many Indigenous worldviews and philosophies, gifts, including personal giftedness, exist primarily to be shared with others” (24).

grandfather Xavier in an attempt to reconnect with a value system based on the traditions of her ancestors. In one particular memory, Annie recalls the first goose hunting trip her grandfather and uncle allow her to participate in. Annie learns by observing Will and Xavier, and after the first goose is shot, Xavier demonstrates the proper way to respect the sacrifice that animal made: he “strokes the bird as if it’s a pet. He whispers words to it and takes some tobacco from his pocket and places it in the bird’s beak” (348). The words he whispers are the same ones Will uses on his own subsequent hunting trips, “*Meegwetch, ntontem*” (225), a form of thanksgiving. By presenting the goose with an offering of tobacco and words of thanks, Xavier is demonstrating to Annie the value of showing thanks and gratitude, respecting the sacrifice made by one to feed another. Will relates to Annie, as he narrates his own hunting experiences, that “[l]etting something suffer unnecessarily was the worst sin of all” (225). Through the stories of her family, Annie is taught responsible consumption: that given the right “communion” (*Communion Kilgour*) and a healthy and supportive community, the individual becomes part of something larger than him or herself, and through this communal identity is liberated to be themselves, rather than become trapped in the self-isolating greed of insatiable consumption.

In *Monkey Beach*, Lisamarie is taught traditional Haisla practices of offering gifts and giving thanks by Ma-ma-oo as a way to understand and manage her interactions with the spirit world, outside of the dominant Eurocentric interpretations of the supernatural and the psychological. Ma-ma-oo takes Lisamarie into the forest, where she demonstrates how to maintain a balance of power between giver and receiver: “[t]he tobacco is for the

tree spirits. You take something, you give something. I'm asking for protection'" (152). In the same way that tobacco is used by Xavier in *Through Black Spruce*, Ma-ma-oo shows Lisamarie that gratitude and respect must be expressed through a reciprocal relationship of mutual exchange, a gift economy similar to that demonstrated in Sami philosophy. When Lisamarie encounters spiritual beings again she is on Monkey Beach, searching for her brother Jimmy whose fishing boat was lost at sea. Remembering what Ma-ma-oo taught her, Lisamarie offers them the only thing she has available: "I hold my hand up to the trees and the blood runs under my sleeve and down my forearm. I turn around in circles, offering this to the things in the trees, waiting" (366). Allowing the spirits to literally feed off of her through the consumption of blood, the spirits, in turn, give Lisamarie the ability to see her brother's fate. She lacks the ability, however, to control the power given to her, and is almost overwhelmed by it before the spirit of Ma-ma-oo appears, reminding Lisamarie that she has "dangerous gift. It's like oxasuli. Unless you know how to use it, it will kill you" (371). The story of oxasuli, a deadly plant that can kill you when consumed but can also be rendered into a powerful medicine, is one that Lisamarie has already heard from Ma-ma-oo, and serves as an apt metaphor; the act of consumption must be moderated and mediated by respect for the natural world and a traditional understanding of the relationships that sustain the individual and allow them to survive.

For Harry Robinson, the act of grateful consumption is not performed by the characters of his narratives but, instead, by the storyteller himself. As Maggie Kilgour suggests in "Metaphors and Incorporation," "feasting and speaking have gone together,

and there is a long tradition of seeing literature as food” (*Communion* 8). In this sense, we can view the transmission of stories and narrative memory from one generation to the next as a sort of “feast,” with Robinson being nourished through the consumption of the oral literature of his community. Kilgour continues by proposing that “to think is to taste, as in the act of knowledge we imagine that we draw the outer world into our minds and possess it” (*Communion* 9). Harry is very careful to acknowledge the people from whom he has acquired his narratives and he has very clearly incorporated this knowledge into both his stories and his epistemological approach to understanding the world and his place in it. He credits many individuals from the generations before his, including his grandmother, his friend John Pierre’s father and the chief, his wife’s father, and his uncle (*Stories* 86-8). Harry expresses to Wickwire the crucial role these individuals played in his acquisition of the narratives that have shaped his ways of knowing,

when I become to be six years old
 And they begin to tell me,
 they keep tellin’ me [...]
 So that’s how it is for me to know a lot of things, a lot of stories-
 what is going to go, and what is been going and so on. (*Stories* 86)

Harry gratefully acknowledges the stories that have been given to him, nurturing a connection to his ancestors and community, and through their narrative memory, nourishing a cultural identity and values he hopes to share with anyone who gets a chance to read his narratives, “both white people and Indian” (89). Harry takes the knowledge he has come to possess very seriously, telling Wickwire that he could tell stories for twenty-one hours, “because this is my job, I’m a storyteller” (*Heart* 14). Harry’s stories are

meant to be ingested and digested by everyone, so that we can then incorporate them into our ways of knowing to better understand the world and our relationships with those who inhabit it. Harry understood that the stories he learned and told were not to be consumed to feed himself or his audience indefinitely; as Jeannette Armstrong suggests, “what you are gifted with, and what you have been given in terms of skills, doesn’t belong to you. It belongs to the community and it is there for the benefit of the community” (qtd. in Isernhagen 162). In Harry’s stories and in his grateful acknowledgement of the lineage through which these stories have come to him, he demonstrates to and instructs his readers on the importance of passing on these stories to others, for the continued nourishment and growth of both spirit and community.

CHAPTER THREE:

Restoring the Foundation: Spirituality and Narratives of Healing

The previous chapter examined the ways in which traditional Indigenous spiritual narratives have been reinterpreted and adapted in contemporary literary texts by authors Eden Robinson, Harry Robinson, and Joseph Boyden, to reflect the compromised contexts of modern Indigenous life in communities across Canada. The present chapter picks up on the responses made by each author to the destructive forces at work in the Indigenous community, born out of a history of colonialism, by reorienting the texts and characters within an Indigenous framework and presenting to readers a process of healing through reconnection to tribal values and spiritual traditions. In order for healing to begin, however, we must first identify and address the cause of so much injury to the spirit and tradition of First Nations communities across the country.

“Colonialism is sick” writes Jo Ann Episkenew in *Taking Back Our Spirits*. “[U]nder its auspices and supported by its mythology, the colonizers have inflicted heinous wounds on the Indigenous population that they set out to civilize” (11). As Neal McLeod suggests, these “wounds” were inflicted through a process of alienation occurring in two interrelated and concurrent ways. The first was the gradual alienation of Indigenous peoples from their land;

Second, the English alienated [Indigenous peoples] from [their] stories and languages, and set up coercive legislation in regards to [their] religious ceremonies. These ceremonies were outlawed in the *Indian Act* (Section 114) and mandatory attendance to residential schools was imposed. (McLeod 19)

Looking to today, wounds are still being inflicted upon First Nations communities through “White privilege and its foundational myth of White supremacy,” which acts as “a socio-cultural health determinant for the Indigenous population” (Episkenew 7). As I have already demonstrated in Chapter Two, individuals like Albert Howard and Frances Widdowson endorse these beliefs in their book, *Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry* with claims of Euro-Canadian cultural, social, and intellectual superiority, and Indigenous assimilation as their primary objective (Widdowson and Howard 2008). In *Wasase*, Taiaiake Alfred argues that the assimilation project, these myths of superiority, and the alienation or disconnection from the land and traditional ways of life have resulted in First Nations communities across Canada, as well as the Americas, experiencing a “spiritual crisis” (31). If individuals and communities are to move forward through a process of healing, Alfred suggests that beyond fighting for land claims and the right to self-government, a “spiritual revolution” must first occur through a “restored spiritual foundation,” built upon processes of cultural reconnection and reaffirmation (22). It seems to me that contemporary First Nations literature is in a position to begin this process of restoration, as Harry Robinson, Joseph Boyden, and Eden Robinson are each offering visions which, while specific to their own tribal and cultural traditions, offer a First Nations approach to Alfred’s vision of healing. If spirituality is, as Lee Irwin suggests, “a pervasive quality of life that develops out of an authentic participation in values and real-life practices meant to connect members of a community with the deepest foundations of personal affirmation and identity” (3), all three authors are offering similar visions of reconnection to the shared “values and real-life practices” through a

regeneration of tribal languages, a reconnection with sacred and tribal spaces, and by challenging the master narrative of the Canadian nation-state, shaped by a history of colonialism, with stories that give voice to an Indigenous perspective and experience.

Language

In an article entitled “Writers on Writing; Two Languages in Mind, But Just One in the Heart,” Louise Erdrich uses a specific example to demonstrate fundamental differences between English and the Ojibwe Language, Ojibwemowin. She writes, “[t]he word for stone, *asin*, is animate. Stones are called grandfathers and grandmothers and are extremely important in Ojibwe philosophy. Once I began to think of stones as animate, I started to wonder whether I was picking up a stone or it was putting itself into my hand. Stones are not the same as they were to me in English” (Erdrich 2)

By assigning an animate force to *asin*, Erdrich is not just pointing to the semantic differences between languages, but is gesturing towards greater, more fundamental ontological and epistemological assumptions that Ojibwemowin expresses. Using only one word, Erdrich demonstrates the power of language to shape the way we act in and interact with our environment, and her example echoes the belief of many scholars of First Nations literature that “languages with radically different structures create radically different worldviews” (Battiste and Henderson 73, in reference to Whorf 1956). Through the power of languages to speak of not just the physical world but of and to the sacred, incorporeal aspects of life, it was traditionally believed that “the *word* carried the power to create, to make things happen-medicine to heal, plants to grow, animals to be caught,

and human beings to enter the spiritual world. Through this sacred power of the *word*, aboriginals sought to shape and control the cosmic forces that governed their lives” (Petronne 10). Existing as part of an oral tradition, words were invested with power and, as such, afforded a high degree of reverence, and Indigenous languages were traditionally considered sacred: “[s]ince language houses the lessons and knowledge that constitutes the cognitive-spiritual powers of groups of people in specific places, Indigenous peoples view their languages as forms of spiritual identity” (Battiste and Henderson 49). Traditional stories contain the shared narrative memory of a community, and sacred knowledge was accessed through language which, to Erdrich, implies that “[t]here is a spirit or an originating genius belonging to each word...to engage in the language is to engage the spirit” (2). It is, therefore, not just the traditional stories but also the language, the words that comprise these stories, that affords individuals a sense of spiritual rootedness and identity, both personal and communal.

Four hundred years of colonial oppression has demonstrated what happens when people are deliberately denied the ability to express themselves in the languages of their ancestors. The colonizers used the residential school system to deny First Nations children the opportunity to learn their tribal languages, thereby removing their ability to communicate with their communities and receive the experiential knowledge passed on through narrative memory. Information coded within words that had evolved in their specific environment was then lost. Anyone who attempted to persist in a tribal language was subjected to a psychological battery of colonialist propaganda about the superiority

of the English language which, as Gloria Bird explains, had demoralizing and dispiriting effects:

The ‘enemy’ was determined to control the language of real life and in that process manipulated how we, as native people, perceived ourselves in relation to the world. Often our ancestors were successfully conditioned to perceive native language as inferior or defective in comparison to the English. A direct response, as it often happened, was that the previous generation did not teach tribal languages to our generation. (qtd. in Bird and Harjo 24).

Without the opportunity to learn their tribal languages, the young generations “can no longer understand the ideas, concepts, insights, attitudes, rituals, ceremonies, institutions brought into being by their ancestors; and, having lost the power to understand, cannot sustain, enrich, or pass on their heritage. No longer will they think Indian or feel Indian” (Johnston 100). If language generates meaning and, therefore, different ways of knowing and being, the implications of losing that language results in spiritual alienation and ideological “homelessness”; Neal McLeod suggests that, “[t]o be home, in an ideological sense, means to dwell in the landscape of the familiar, collective memories” (19).

Language, I would argue, comprises a large tract of this “landscape of the familiar,” housing the sacred stories, shared truths, and narrative memory which can only be expressed in tribal languages rooted in a spatially- and temporally-situated home. A legacy of colonialism means that First Nations communities have been forced to reside within someone else’s ideological and philosophical “home,” unable to achieve full self-expression and identification, and relate to the environment that once sustained them.

While First Nations communities in Canada (and across the world) are continually threatened with the extinction of their tribal languages, scholars and authors are celebrating a growing movement of language regeneration in many communities. Though few and far between, there are still elders today who speak and teach their tribal languages to the younger generations. Louise Erdrich writes about her own experiences learning Ojibwemowin from the elders, the language of her ancestors, in order to reconnect spiritually with Ojibwe tradition, to understand Ojibwe humour, and to comprehend the “human relationship to place in the deepest way possible” (Erdrich 1). In *Monkey Beach*, Eden Robinson’s character, Ma-ma-oo, takes on the responsibility of teaching her granddaughter, Lisamarie, the Haisla language when she begins to show a keen interest in Haisla tradition. Lisamarie’s parents were part of the generation of people sent to residential schools to be assimilated into Euro-Canadian culture. Ma-ma-oo explains to Lisamarie that, because of the stigma attached to maintaining connections with the tribal heritage, Lisamarie’s mother has either “forgotten,” or “ignores” (154) traditional Haisla knowledge, including the language. As Lisamarie begins to receive visits from spirits of Haisla cosmology, her interest in Haisla traditions is awakened and she turns to Ma-ma-oo for guidance.

Ma-ma-oo begins by teaching Lisamarie words that reveal the intimate knowledge Haisla elders maintain about the place they are from. Ma-ma-oo gives Lisamarie three different words- *pipxs’m*, *sya’konalh*, and *mimayus*- each of which are a kind of blueberry distinguishable only to the experienced. Lisamarie is surprised by this knowledge, telling Ma-ma-oo that she “had never noticed that there were different types

of blueberry bushes. If it was blue and on a bush, you picked it” (160). She is struck by the detailed knowledge contained within the three different Haisla words for “blueberry,” each one describing a subtle trait that differentiates one from the others. This information is what is lost when, expected to speak in English, the language has not evolved to reflect the ecology it attempts to describe. Through Ma-ma-oo’s simple lesson, Lisamarie begins to recognize the role of Haisla language in passing on tribal knowledge which has been compiled over generations of ancestral experiences.

While Lisamarie is intent on learning as much as she can about her Haisla heritage, Ma-ma-oo remains realistic about her expectations. Ma-ma-oo shares Haisla stories with Lisamarie in English, but reminds her granddaughter that “to really understand the old stories... you had to speak Haisla” (211). Lisamarie is disheartened by this reality, recognizing the slow learning process involved: “[Ma-ma-oo] would tell me a new Haisla word a day, and I’d memorize it. But, I thought dejectedly, even at one word a day, that was only 365 words a year, so I’d be an old woman by the time I could put a sentence together” (211). This is the reality faced today by Indigenous people in Canada who, raised in English-speaking households, have become disconnected from the lessons contained within the tribal stories, and must look to the reclamation of language in order to reconnect with traditional values. While acquiring a proficiency in the Haisla language comes slowly to Lisamarie, the lessons contained within each word are not lost on her. She recognizes that “names have power” (180) after learning that Haisla, or Xa’isla, “is actually a word for the village or the people of the village who lived at the mouth of the Kitimat River” (194). This one word locates Lisamarie within both an ideological home

as well as a specific spatial and temporal region; in recognizing herself as Xa'isla, Lisamarie understands herself as belonging to an identifiable location, “the village... at the mouth of the Kitimat River.” Along with this, the intimate ecological knowledge of Ma-ma-oo, and the tribal stories she shares engage Lisamarie with the spirit and identity of the ancestors that first settled at the mouth of the Kitimat River and gave name to Kitamaat Village and the Haisla community found there.

For Annie Bird of Joseph Boyden's *Through Black Spruce*, the Cree language is used as a form of refuge and protection as she finds herself absorbed deep into the dangerous lifestyle that her sister, Suzanne, was trying to escape. The first encounter Annie has with Danny, a drug trafficker and motorcycle gang member, leaves her feeling threatened; as he attempts conversation with Annie, she feigns a lack of understanding, telling Danny, “I am from France” (135). With this lie, Annie is attempting to maintain distance from this dangerous man through linguistic incomprehension; she walks away “in victory” (135), having momentarily silenced him by implying a language barrier exists between them. Her victory, however, is short lived as she discovers that Danny is owed a lot of money by Suzanne's boyfriend, Gus, and Danny believes Annie knows where he can find the missing couple.

Annie finds herself at the mercy of Danny and the model Soleil, both of whom Annie recognizes as windigo, the dangerous monsters I discussed in Chapter Two that lack empathy and are driven by a need to consume, literally and materially. Danny is willing to take a human life as payment for the money owed to him, and with Gus and Suzanne missing, Annie becomes his target. During her second confrontation with

Danny, Annie realizes that Danny is French-Canadian, and her allusion to being French can no longer help her to avoid his threats.

Soleil's demands on Annie to replace her sister as the "Indian Princess" (Boyden 200) model threaten to consume Annie's very identity and sense of self: "I can't escape," she realizes, wondering, "Who am I?" (233). Terrified by this realization, and by Danny's threats, Annie makes the decision to only "talk in Cree," the thought of which "calms" her. As a Cree woman amongst a group of "shining white people" (232), Annie uses the Cree language as a way to contextualize her experience by defining it, and herself, on her own terms. Recognizing Soleil as her "keeper," Annie insists that "I will speak Cree to her and it is this alone that clicks that gear in my head and whispers to me the words that straighten my back" (233). Through language, Annie is empowered from within, and finds the spiritual strength she needs to resist Soleil's influence. Annie begins by introducing herself in Cree, "*Annie Peneshish ntishinikason. Winipekohk ntocin*" (234), thereby enforcing her tribal identity as a Cree woman. Speaking in Cree becomes a sort of weapon, her words being deployed as "wordarrows"¹² to slowly undermine the uneven power dynamic that exists between herself and Soleil. Working in English, Annie describes Soleil as, "[s]kin glittering, her blond hair shining like a halo around her thin face. She's like one of those models. She is one of those models. The young goddess of them" (233). Once she has Soleil's attention with her Cree introduction, Annie begins "speaking Cree in earnest now, the words at first awkward and chosen poorly, telling

¹² I first introduced this term in Chapter One, as used by Neal McLeod in the essay "Coming Home Through Stories": "wordarrows," as McLeod defines them, "are like arrows that can be shot at the narratives of the colonial power... [W]ordarrows can help to establish a new discursive space" (31).

Soleil that her hair is green, she has small tits, that she's too skinny and needs to eat more moose meat. Oohs and aahs come from Soleil, and then from the ones around her" (234). This is the first time Annie's proficiency in the Cree language is ever alluded to, and if we agree that "language is the signature of both individual and collective identity" (Chamberlin 15), her speech allows her to distance herself from the model identity imposed upon her by choosing to associate herself to with her Cree ancestry. Speaking Cree allows Annie to break through the mystique cast around Soleil and express truths about her that others are either blind to or have been intimidated into not expressing. If languages generate meaning differently (Chamberlin 16), interpreting Soleil through the Cree language allows Annie to view Soleil outside of Western standards of power and beauty and to recognize her as the self-absorbed, power-hungry windigo monster of consumption. Her words in Cree, accompanied by the implication that truth has been spoken, breaks through the superficiality and materiality of existence she has, until this point, experienced in her search for Suzanne.

Harry Robinson also reveals a similar interest in the expression of truth through language in the stories he tells. The second section in his *Nature Power* collection, entitled "Power to do the Doctoring" explores, specifically, the capacity to literally heal through language. Each story features a medicine man or woman who is imbued with the power to heal by their shoo-MISH. Harry describes the shoo-MISH as "animal or bird" (*Nature Power* 10) which act as "power-helpers" (11) to Okanagan individuals: "this animal, whoever they meet, got to talk to 'em and tell 'em what they should do... And this is his power. And when the time comes, then they could sing his song. Then he was

an Indian doctor” (10). This responsibility as an “Indian doctor” is also accompanied by the responsibility to express truth through words or song. In describing a woman who had been given the power to heal by her shoo-MISH, Harry explains that her power is also derived from her ability to express truth:

See, whatever she says, they always true.

They never tell a lie.

They tell something

and it comes true-right.

She knows. (*Nature Power* 207)

Harry is careful, however, to remind us that these truths are expressed “in Indian, you know./ Not in English” (201). The potential this woman holds as an “Indian doctor” originates in the combination of assistance from the shoo-MISH and the spiritual force behind truthful words spoken in the tribal language. As Penny Petrone reminds us, words for many Indigenous communities:

did not merely represent meaning. They possessed the power to change reality itself [...] For a people who carried their history in the spoken word and incorporated their values in story and song, it was only natural for them to invest words with power and reverence. They relied on the ability to use and manipulate language- the fluent and artful use of words- to influence not only other people but also spirits. (10)

By giving them a song, the shoo-MISH are connecting their human counterpart with ancestral knowledge and providing them with the ability to use truth, expressed through language, to influence reality. Harry relates an instance in which a local man, John Kwee-LA-kin from Cawston, is given the power to heal his ill cousin. His shoo-MISH visits him and instructs John on how to heal his cousin: “you sing your song and you fix ‘em

up/ and you take the sickness away from them” (“Nature” 152). As Willie Ermine suggests, Indigenous knowledge has historically “contained the awareness that everything is energy, that everything is interconnected and that everything possesses consciousness” (qtd. in “Aboriginal Health” 5). For Harry Robinson, there is an energy and a spiritual interconnectedness between the songs provided by the shoo-MISH and sung by the healer, and the health of the sick individual. These healing songs, which are performed by Indigenous peoples across North America, “tell us about our history, tell us about our creation. To be able to do that is trying to restore, to cure the patient, for him or her to become part of harmony again” (Lewton and Bydone 483). The song, then, is not just about physical healing, but also represents healing through a reconnection with traditional values and a reaffirmation of cultural beliefs.

Place

The first pages of J Edward Chamberlin’s *If This Is Your Land, Where Are Your Stories?* document a confrontation between government officials and a Tsimshian community of northwest British Columbia. Chamberlin writes how the Tsimshian were “astonished” that the officials were claiming their land for the government. To express their confusion, one elder asked, “If this is your land, . . . where are your stories?” and then proceeded to tell a story in Gitksan, the Tsimshian language (1). While the story itself may not have been understood by those English speakers in attendance, the lesson is clear: the ties that connect the Tsimshian to the land are stronger than just claims of ownership. Their traditional and sacred stories and ways of being are intimately connected to the

relationship they have with the land. Home for the Tsimshian is, quite literally, the landscape of narrative memory and, as Vine Deloria Jr. suggests, “[e]very society needs these kinds of sacred places because they help to instill a sense of social cohesion in the people and remind them of the passage of generations that have brought them to the present. A society that cannot remember and honor its past is in peril of losing its soul” (Deloria 328). To be removed from the land is to be disconnected from the spiritual connection with ancestors, sacred knowledge, and the “social cohesion” that arises around a shared space.

The forced removal of Indigenous peoples from ancestral land is only one of the many outrages committed by the colonizers in Canada, and effects are still being felt across the country today (Caledonia, which I mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, is a textbook example). After the British succeeded in gaining control from the French over most of the North American continent in the mid-eighteenth century, they then had to worry about securing the land for the British Crown (and, after the revolution, for American settlers). This was done through the combination of forced removal and relocation of Indigenous people across North America (the Trail of Tears¹³ being, perhaps, the most infamous example of this), and legislation which removed the legal rights to land from Indigenous populations. British Acts such as the 1860 *Indian Lands*

¹³ The Trail of Tears, as it is now known, refers to the forced removal of the Cherokee people from Georgia, the Carolinas, and Tennessee to Oklahoma (Perdue and Green 168-9). In 1830, American president Andrew Jackson signed into law the Indian Removal Act, which granted him the authority to enter into treaties with the “Eastern Indians” that would provide for their removal west (Krupat 18). In 1838, after much resistance on the part of the Cherokee population, federal troops began the forced removal of the Cherokee people to “Indian Land” west of the Mississippi River (Krupat 19); out of a population of thirteen thousand, it has been estimated that over four thousand Cherokee died from disease and exposure on the forced march across the country (Krupat 19).

Act “formalized procedures for surrendering Aboriginal lands and gave authority over Aboriginal people and Aboriginal lands to the colonial legislature [...] This act provided a mechanism to annex Aboriginal lands” (“Meaningful Consultation” 4-5). Following soon after, the Canadian *Indian Act* of 1876 legally set in place the reserve system, which is land “set apart by treaty or otherwise for the use or benefit of or granted to a particular band of Indians, of which the legal title is in the Crown, but which is unsurrendered” (“Indian Act” 3). This system effectively removed any rights that Indigenous individuals and populations held over their ancestral land and often relocated them to less desirable tracts of land. Today, the auditor-general’s reports outline the damages that are still being experienced by communities living on reserves: a significant gap between secondary school completion rates for people living on reserves and rates for “other Canadians”; housing shortages; and “the lack of a legislative regime to ensure that water quality on reserves met the Guidelines for Canadian Drinking Water Quality, despite the existence of such a regime in every province and territory” (Den Tandt “Reserve System”). On top of this, substance abuse, violence, and suicide rates are higher on reserves than they are in any other part of the country (Waldram et al., 2006).

These signs all point to communities who are experiencing spiritual defeat and Deloria’s prediction that “[a] society that cannot remember and honor its past is in peril of losing its soul” appears to be manifesting itself. Removing Indigenous peoples from their ancestral homes and sacred spaces is a primary “wound” that the colonizers have inflicted upon the colonized. If these wounds are to be healed, scholars like Marie Battiste and Sakej Henderson suggest that it will be through reconnection and “protection

of the environment so they can end their grieving and generate a balance that can heal a dominated and oppressed spirituality and, eventually, heal countries. Protecting the ecology is protecting Indigenous worldviews, languages, identities, spiritual teachings, and practices” (107).

In *Monkey Beach* especially, we saw the way that language evolved and was used to convey the spiritual connection that the Haisla maintained with their ecology and the space they consider home. This concept of home, however, encompasses a meaning greater than just the site on which people dwell: “[t]hese ecologies do not surround indigenous peoples; we are an integral part of them and we inherently belong to them” (Battiste and Henderson 9). Lisamarie demonstrates this concept to us as she describes the origins of the word Haisla, her tribal identity: Haisla or Xa’isla, refers both to the specific location of the community, and to the people who inhabit this village. The name, Xa’isla, affords individuals like Lisamarie a tribal identity through belonging to specific location. The importance of landscape to belonging is detailed from the very first pages of the novel, as Lisamarie instructs the reader to “[f]ind a map of British Columbia. Point to the middle of the coast... Drag your finger across the map” (4). She continues to guide us through the geography of the British Columbia coast until we are able to locate the destination: “once you pass the head of the Douglas Channel, you are firmly in Haisla territory” (4). By walking us through the process of finding “Kitamaat Village, with its seven hundred Haisla people tucked in between the mountains and the ocean” (5), our attention is very purposefully being focused onto a specific and identifiable landscape that has historical and ancestral implications for the people living there. For Lisamarie,

the geography of British Columbia's west coast and specifically that of "Haisla territory" becomes a way to locate herself, not just spatially, but also cosmologically and ontologically within a Haisla way of knowing: "[e]cological insight creates our vision of the animate 'natural' world. It informs our communion with the land, our wisdom, and the various dimensions of our faith and our hopes. Indigenous order, consciousness, and heritage are shaped and sustained by ecological forces and by the interrelationship of their changing forms" (Battiste and Henderson 9).

These places, whose geographical locations are specifically detailed to us, are co-inhabited by both the people who live there and the spiritual forces and beings which are intimately tied to the specific ecology around Kitamaat. In the forests around Kitamaat, Ma-ma-oo describes to Lisamarie how "[t]he chief trees- the biggest, strongest, oldest ones- had a spirit, a little man with red hair. Olden days, they'd lead medicine men to the best trees to make canoes with'" (152). Lisamarie recognizes this little man as the one whose visits foretell what are often tragic events in her life, such as the deaths of her uncle and grandmother. After being explained by her grandmother, these visits made by the little man, which are initially frightening for Lisamarie, serve to remind her that she is part of a unique spiritual connection with the land on which her ancestors once lived, and are not a sign, as her mother suggests, that she needs Prozac (3). Lisamarie is then able to reformulate her perceptions of reality to include a sacred connection she holds with the ecology of her ancestors.

Another indication that Eden Robinson would like us to consider ecology and landscape as important factors in the process of Haisla and Indigenous reconnection with

a spiritual foundation is the illuminating title of the novel, *Monkey Beach*. Aside from being the island off of which the boat of Lisamarie's missing brother, Jimmy, sank, Monkey Beach is also the home of the b'gwus, a sasquatch-like creature from Haisla cosmology and a popular story in Lisamarie's family. The first time Lisamarie catches sight of the b'gwus on Monkey Beach, she is embarrassed at the thought of telling others what she'd seen. Her parents, in a disavowal of Haisla cultural tradition, insist that the b'gwus is "just a story" (9), and Ma-ma-oo is the only person who voices dissent at this claim. The second time Lisamarie sees the b'gwus, Lisamarie is in her late teens. She has experienced the death of uncle and Ma-ma-oo, and the trauma of being raped by close friend. No longer embarrassed by the sighting, Lisamarie instead uses this sighting to begin a reformulation of her epistemological, cosmological, and ontological understanding of world, and what exists in it, in order to begin a process of healing. As she contemplates the existence of the b'gwus, Lisamarie declares that she wants "to stay here on Monkey Beach. Some places are full of power, you can feel it, like a warmth, a tingle" (316). Recognizing Monkey Beach as a sacred site allows Lisamarie to draw from its power and connect to a spiritual strength through Haisla understanding of cosmology, which allows humans and spirit being to coexist. On Monkey Beach she is visited by her Ma-ma-oo and Uncle Mick, both of whom are now dead, but who give her the spiritual strength she requires to move past the trauma she has experienced. As Vine Deloria nicely summarizes,

Sacred sites that higher spiritual powers have chosen for manifestation enable us to focus our concerns on the specific forms of our lives. These places remind us of our unique relationship with the spiritual forces that

govern the universe and call us to fulfill our religious vocations. These kind of religious experiences have shown us something of the nature of the universe by an affirmative manifestation of themselves, and this knowledge illuminates everything else we know. (Deloria, *Spirit* 334)

Lisamarie internalizes this “religious experience,” and the knowledge she gains from it does, literally, illuminate the ways she understands reality; by the end of the novel she is “no longer cold,” and instead finds herself “so light [she] could just drift away” (374). Though she remains firmly in the land of the living, Lisamarie is able to integrate Haisla cosmology within her understanding of reality, connecting her spiritually to the individuals and forces from which she derives the potential to heal.

In the world that Harry Robinson recreates for us through his stories, place is consistently demonstrated as a reminder of the unique Okanagan “relationship with the spiritual forces that govern the universe.” This relationship between place and spiritual forces is the same one that inspires Harry to fulfill his “religious vocation” as a storyteller, sharing the wisdom and narrative memory he has gained from those individuals who also lived their lives in the Okanagan region. Harry’s deep spiritual connection to the stories he tells draws heavily from the strong associations he feels with the narrative settings. Harry laments that he never acquired his own shoo-MISH, or “power helper,” telling Wendy Wickwire, “I was sent out a few times, but I never see nothing” (*Nature Power* 12). This does not, however, sever the connections that Harry has to the Okanagan spiritual tradition and the place he imagines for himself within its cosmology. Instead, he maintains these relationships through the stories he tells, which

are authenticated by narrative settings recognized as sacred spaces that are a part of his everyday life.

Almost all of the stories Harry tells are associated in some way to the landscape of the Okanagan Valley region, a geography that Harry was intimately familiar with during his life. In his story “A *Spatla* was Killed by Rabbit and Chipmunk,” Harry recalls an event from the “imbellable” time, which refers to “*chap-TEEK-whl-* the Okanagan word for stories from ‘way back’ during the time of the ‘animal-people’” (*Stories* 36). This was a time when forms were less rigid, with no distinct division between humans and animals. In this “imbellable” story, Chipmunk and Rabbit take it upon themselves to kill a *spatla*, a cannibalistic monster¹⁴. Harry records how Rabbit and Chipmunk trick the *spatla* into a fire pit, thereby killing it, and ends his story describing the exact location this event took place:

That’s between Loomis and Konkonala.
 Not far from road.
 Was a little lake is still there today.
 I go by there on the saddle horse
 and I turn off and I take a good look.
 I did see where the *spatla* was killed.
 But I can’t say when.
 It is way, way back. (*Stories* 45)

Identifying the location of these “imbellable” stories provides Harry with direct access to traditional Okanagan cosmology. According to Battiste and Henderson, “Indigenous peoples construct spiritual teachings around the belief that at certain places there is a

¹⁴The *spatla* is discussed at length in Chapter Two.

sacred ambiance that empowers human consciousness and spirituality” (107). This understanding is based on the idea that landscape and place are not inanimate objects—as Louise Erdrich suggests in her discussion on the Ojibwe language, the word for stone is animate—but are themselves alive and retain their own memory of earlier events. Harry’s spiritual connection with place depends on the notion that place can teach the people who reside there about the truths embedded in the physical location. The familiar landscape of the Okanagan Valley region allows the stories to remain tangible for Harry, and in his ability to locate these sacred places, he becomes part of the narrative and part of its cosmology and spiritual teachings. Harry’s spiritual foundation, upon which beliefs and ways of knowing are based, are informed by the sacred spaces he identifies in his stories that correspond to landscape of which he considers himself a part.

While Annie’s journey in *Through Black Spruce* takes her away from the cold forests around Moosonee in Northern Ontario, she maintains the same connections to place that have been demonstrated by both Harry Robinson and Eden Robinson. *Through Black Spruce* differs from the other text in that the protagonist takes leave of the familiar landscape of home, detailing the effects this dislocation has. Annie recognizes the spiritual importance that place holds for herself and her family as she finds herself literally stretched thin in the world of modeling, “as thin and see-through as an old T-shirt the longer [she] stay[ed] down south” (130). Annie grew up hunting and trapping in the forests of northern Ontario, and laments the loss of this relationship to the land for many members of her community: “[i]n their lives, they’ve gone from living on the land in teepees and *askinkans*, hunting, trapping, trading in order to survive, to living in

clapboard houses pushing squeaky grocery carts up and down aisles filled with overpriced and unhealthy food... Diabetes and obesity and cancer plague our community” (37). Historically, and even today, many consider a hunting and gathering subsistence lifestyle as “primitive” based on a social Darwinist scale of evolution (Widdowson and Howard 54). However, being settled on reserves and assimilated into a supposedly “more productive” Euro-Canadian sedentary lifestyle has led to countless social and health problems among First Nations communities who no longer have a way to use or maintain the knowledge about the surrounding ecology that once sustained a healthy way of life.

Annie is taught to understand the ecology of northern Ontario and the traditional ways of hunting and trapping from her Uncle Will and her *Moshum*, or grandfather, Xavier Bird. This knowledge has been refined over the years by the expertise of ancestors; *Moshum* recalls learning from his aunt Niska, and shoulders the responsibility of teaching Annie, describing the lessons he learned from Niska and telling Annie, “now I teach it to you” (345). Annie’s expertise and ways of understanding her place in the world are shaped by her deep investment in the ecology of home. When Annie’s mother suggests moving Will, in a coma, to a better hospital down south, Annie disagrees: “I want to explain to her that our family doesn’t do well down south, that when we leave our home, the world becomes an ugly, difficult place, that I know as sure as I’ve ever known anything that if Uncle Will is taken away from his home, he will shrivel and die. Mum won’t understand this, though. Nobody will. But I know this will happen” (176).

Like Annie's, Will's life has been nurtured and sustained by the relationship to an ancestral way of life he has developed through the familiar ecology around Moosonee. "Home" for Annie and Will is a sacred site and as such, it "provide[s] a defence against being overwhelmed by reality and isolated from the stories and songs that nourish land and language. Sacred sites offer sanctuary" (Chamberlin 52). Annie understands, where her mother does not, that the relationship she and Will have to place is a force that both sustains and restores emotional, physical, and psychological well-being.

Storytelling

During the 18th annual Margaret Laurence Lecture held at Trent University, Eden Robinson discussed the significance of setting her novel, *Monkey Beach*, in the real village of Kitamaat, British Columbia. While writing much of her novel from memory, Robinson recognized the inaccuracies of certain assumptions taken for granted because she "remembered them that way. But," she continued, "when I started speaking to people they would very gently correct me and tell me, 'this is not exactly how it works [...] I'll tell you a story.' And then they'd tell me a story and I could see where I was veering off the path" (Robinson, "Eighteenth"). In her discussions with other Haisla individuals, Robinson came to better appreciate the fundamental importance of stories as vessels of cultural knowledge and shared truths. Stories instill in us a sense of belonging and root us in a certain cultural tradition. The storytelling tradition to which we belong tells us each different truths (Chamberlain 1), which complement and explain our individual experiences; but these stories are derived from collective memories, recollections, and

explanations which hold meaning and importance for the tradition from which they arose. Stories often bring us together, but they can also separate the ‘us’ from the ‘them’ when two storytelling traditions suggest multiple and conflicting versions of the truth. This has proved to be especially problematic for Canada’s First Nations people, who have struggled against a legacy of colonialism which has sought to repress and reject traditional Indigenous spiritual and cultural beliefs. For Haisla culture and other First Nations cultures across Canada, stories have always been an important tool for the dissemination of cultural knowledge (Deloria, *God* 122). Traditional Indigenous narratives grew out of oral traditions (Angel 19), passed on through story, song, and ceremony, and at the heart of these stories are First Nations spiritual traditions, which informed all aspects of personal and social life (Ridington 467-8). Therefore, the repression of traditional stories through the colonization process, and their replacement with Settler narratives of colonization and cultivation of a *terra nullius*, were not just acts of cultural oppression, but also of spiritual repression. Stories, writes Jo-Ann Episkenew, “are a type of medicine and, like medicine, can be healing or poisonous depending on the dosage or type. Indigenous people have heard poisonous stories in the colonial discourse. To heal, people must write or create a new story or script of their lives” (13). This is, I would argue, the challenge that First Nations authors, including Eden Robinson, Harry Robinson, and Joseph Boyden, are undertaking today with contemporary Indigenous literature. They are turning back to their own tribal literatures and narratives as a way to recover and reconnect with traditional spiritual beliefs, while also writing their own counter-stories that challenge the master narrative of the foundation of the Canadian

nation-state and the colonial discourse and Eurocentric assumptions on which the master narrative is founded. It is within this space of the counter-story, or stories, that a restored cultural and spiritual identity can be imagined, and the process of healing can begin.

Ma-ma-oo in *Monkey Beach* calls upon traditional Haisla narratives and beliefs in order to assist Lisamarie to better understand her experiences. In much the same way that the existence of ghosts was not open for debate with the therapist, Ma-ma-oo is similarly obstinate in her own conviction that ghosts, spirits, and ‘other-than-human-beings’ are very real presences among the Haisla community. When Ma-ma-oo instructs Lisamarie to speak with her dead grandfather on his birthday, Lisamarie is confused: “He’s not here,” Lisamarie responds, pragmatically. Ma-ma-oo’s reply, however paradoxical it may seem to individuals trained in an empirical tradition, instructs our understanding of Haisla engagements with the spiritual world: “Yes he is... You just can’t see him because he’s dead” (79). Similarly, when Lisamarie confesses to Ma-ma-oo that she has been seeing ghosts, Ma-ma-oo assures her that “you don’t have to be scared of things you don’t understand. They’re just ghosts” (265). Ma-ma-oo’s belief in a spiritual world validates an alternative way of engaging with reality. Her insistence on spirit or ghostly presences insists upon a reconsideration of the strange and the familiar. For Ma-ma-oo, there is nothing strange about talking to the spirit of her dead husband or believing in ghosts because they are merely manifestations of what was once familiar. Ma-ma-oo’s insistence in the existence of ghosts could also be read as a form of resistance to Western discursive traditions which categorize belief in ghosts as superstitious. Ma-ma-oo is not

superstitious, nor is she primitive. Instead, she holds epistemological assumptions which do not deny the existence of ghosts, spirits, and other-than-human beings.

Ma-ma-oo is equally frank about her convictions in the existence of the b'gwus and the little man with red hair, both of which Lisamarie has seen. The stories that Ma-ma-oo tells of these creatures validate Lisamarie's experiences and establish them as legitimate presences. The story that Ma-ma-oo tells of the b'gwus, is not sensationalized like the accounts of sasquatch sightings that dominate popular culture. Instead, it is a story firmly rooted in Haisla tradition; the original b'gwus was a Haisla man, cuckolded by his wife and brother and left to die on Monkey Beach. Lisamarie's initial excitement over her own sighting of the b'gwus on Monkey Beach is tempered by her fear that if she tells anyone about it, they will laugh at her the way they laugh at Ma-ma-oo when she insists that the b'gwus is real. However, when she sees the b'gwus again, years after Ma-ma-oo has died, her reaction is different. She cherishes the sighting, "comforted knowing that magical things were still living in the world" (316). The existence of these spiritual beings, and Lisamarie's belief in them, assures her that change is still feasible and a different way of knowing is still possible in a cultural-political world that has become trapped and contained by colonial racism. For her, it is a sign that the world is not completely dominated by a legacy of colonialism; other forces are at work and other ways of seeing the world are possible. The stories substantiate a connection to a cultural past and encourage engagement with the Haisla traditions on a personal level through these traditional narratives grounded in a familiar landscape. The stories themselves also act as 'ghosts,' indelible, intangible, and enduring presences which act as mediators or

connections between this world and the next, between the past and the present. They are a connection to cultural history and tradition, but stories of the b'gwus also serve as a more immediate connection to loved ones that Lisamarie has lost.

In *Through Black Spruce*, Annie employs traditional Ojibway-Cree narrative about the windigo in order to interpret her experiences through an Ojibway-Cree epistemology and remain spiritually connected to the teachings of her ancestors while she is geographically distant from her home territory. The traditional windigo narratives¹⁵ told to her by her uncle Will and grandfather Xavier allow Annie to understand through an Indigenous way of knowing the foreign world of modeling governed by excessive material consumption, while encouraging readers to consider the consumption practices of a contemporary capitalist society critically. The stories Annie hears from Will and Xavier are “enfolding lessons. Not only do they transmit validated experience; they also renew, awaken, and honor spiritual forces. Hence, almost every ancient story does not explain; instead it focuses on processes of knowing” (Battiste and Henderson 77). Annie’s heritage as a Cree woman and a descendant of a windigo-killing family, conveys this Indigenous “process of knowing”; in Chapter Two I outlined the symptoms of the windigo: the need to fill an insatiable hunger, the crossing of the taboo of cannibalism, and the resulting insanity and insatiable need to consume. Reading these symptoms into the world of modeling and drug-dealing that Annie finds herself a part of helps to unfold an alternative process of knowing that reveals consumerism’s insanity and senselessness.

¹⁵ As discussed in Chapter Two, the windigo is a cannibalistic monster from Cree and Ojibway cosmology. While many of the windigo narratives describe a monster of superhuman size and strength with an insatiable appetite, the windigo as “the spirit of excess” (“Heritage” Johnston 167) can also be understood as a lesson on the importance of moderation and of placing community interests before the material and superficial needs of the individual.

In choosing to set his novel in the world of modeling, a widely accepted, and even admired, social practice which turns the human body itself into a commodity, Boyden emphasizes the cannibalistic nature of capital consumption. Invoking these narratives in a contemporary urban environment renews the relevance of the lessons contained within traditional stories, thereby restoring a sense of spiritual connectedness for Annie.

While spiritual regeneration and reconnection is achieved through the renewal of traditional Ojibway and Cree stories, a sense of healing is also achieved through the actual process of storytelling, and not just the stories themselves. As the narration of *Through Black Spruce* switches between Annie and Will, we are initially left with the sense that two separate narratives are being recorded. Will, who tells his story from within the silent world of a coma, reminisces on his life in Moosonee and northern Ontario, and the changes faced by his small community and other communities across James Bay area reserves, as he attempts to piece together the events that led up to his being found in a coma. Annie's story, related to her unconscious uncle in the hospital, takes place away from home, in the high-fashion world of Toronto, Montreal, and New York as she searches for her beautiful sister, the model Suzanne. Initially, each story follows its own trajectory, as Will and Annie take turns relating their stories. They begin to converge, however, as Annie and Will both turn to traditional windigo narratives to explain the problems they are faced with. Will recognizes local youth Marius Netmaker, responsible for smuggling destructive drugs like cocaine and crystal meth to the James Bay reserves and selling it to the youth, as a windigo. Danny, whom Annie recognizes as the embodiment of the insatiable windigo, is after Suzanne's boyfriend, Gus Netmaker,

brother of Marius, for money owed. The two narrative arcs eventually converge when we discover that Danny travels to Moosonee in search of Gus and Suzanne, teaming up with Marius when he arrives, and attacking Will with the intention of learning where Suzanne and Gus are. This is the cause of Will's coma.

As Annie's story explains Danny's hitherto unexplained presence in Moosonee, Will expresses his comprehension: "I finally understand how I've gotten here. I can put it to words... I'm warm again" (339). This narrative parallelism of one account informing an interpretation or understanding of another introduces what Mikhail Bakhtin termed dialogism, in which events or utterances in a narrative speak or are oriented toward other events or utterances, both within and outside of the novel (Phelan and Rabinowitz 544). The structure of this text, in which both narrators and narrations are afforded equal priority, challenges a classical narrative structure derived from the notion that "a story speaks in [...] the male story. The knight out (the night out!) questing or hunting" (Kroetsch 170). The shared narration and dialogical nature of *Through Black Spruce* begins to unweave the master narrative of Canadian history and politics by challenging the idea that there can ever be one master narrative while also insisting on the recognition of Indigenous voices and ways of knowing which have, historically, been silenced. With the emergence of contemporary Indigenous literature, the master narrative of the Canadian nation-state is no longer a "summary of the stories that embody the settlers' 'socially shared understanding'" (Episkew 2), nor is it a "male story." Instead, as *Through Black Spruce* demonstrates, one cannot consider him- or herself "whole" when relying on only one story to represent the body of truths that comprise one's experiences.

In recognizing himself and his role in the narrative of another, and in having his own story comprise one part of a larger narrative, Will is literally awakened once he can identify himself as part of a something larger than himself. Whereas Indigenous voices are so often silenced in the official accounts of Canadian history and nationhood, Will demonstrates the potential for healing and spiritual growth that can occur when individuals are afforded a position of both authority and agency in the narrative(s) that define their identity, representation, and place within a community.

In Harry Robinson's story "Coyote Makes a Deal with the King of England," Coyote is visited by an Angel from God, who hires Coyote "to see the king" in England and "make the law/ [for] the white people and the Indian" (*Stories* 67). As Coyote tricks his way into a viewing with the King, claiming to be a king himself, he presents the King of England with an argument for why a law is necessary; the King's "children," claims Coyote, "just go and claim the land/ and they just do as they like./ If my children tell them, 'Here, this is mine,'/ then they will kill 'em" (70). While not clearly stated, the King that Coyote confronts is, according to Robinson, four kings before the rule of Queen Victoria, most likely making him King George II, who ruled from 1727 to 1760¹⁶. This period corresponds with the beginning of a massive push for British colonial expansion into North America. As Coyote sees it, the colonizers "don't do good with my children," and laws must be created to negotiate a peaceful existence between the two. The king's immediate response is a call for violence, threatening to wage war against Coyote, but

¹⁶ In the story, Robinson tells us that this first king did not actually complete the law, nor did his son, "the third king," or "the four." It is finally the Queen, presumably Victoria, who found out "that her grandfather, great grandfather, and grandfather, all along... they never do the work... So she decides to do it" (*Stories*78). As monarch during the signing of the 1867 *Indian Act*, Victoria corresponds to the "queen" Robinson refers to, who eventually completes "the Indians' law" (*Stories*78).

Coyote, by another trick through “the power that God give him,” again tricks the king with a mirage of warriors, who “all had feather on their head./ And they all had a spear” (72). The king, frightened by Coyote’s army, resentfully concedes and Coyote stipulates that this law must include the rights to land

just for the Indians to be in there, not to be crowded
by your children...
You write it all down.
Then it can be that way ‘til the end of the world.
And this reserve it can be written down reserve.
Reserve at all time.
Can never be sold.
Can never be changed...
Never can take away from Indians.
But still the Indians, they got a right
on the outside of the reserve as well. (74).

Robinson relates how the king was not really satisfied by this agreement, that “Coyote just force ‘em to do something he don’t really like. And the idea is still the same right now. They white people, they still not really satisfied... they always take a little. They always try to beat the Indians because the king is not really satisfied” (75).

This Coyote story is fascinating for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the unlikely meeting of a “historical” king of England and a “mythical” being from Okanagan cosmology. For many years, literary critics and anthropologists understood Coyote as a “trickster,” interpreting this to mean a “selfish buffoon,” “‘selfish’ because so much of the trickster’s activity is oriented toward the gratification of his enormous appetites for food and sex, and ‘buffoon’ because the elaborate deceits that the trickster

devises in order to satisfy these appetites so often backfire and leave the trickster looking incredibly foolish” (Carroll 106). What this reading of trickster figures fails to recognize, however, is the “trickster’s sacred function within traditional oral cultures as a healer, but also as a disruptive semiotic element that resists colonial representations and stories of containment” (Smith 75). Harry’s Coyote falls firmly into this second interpretation of the trickster figure as healer and as the subverter of Euro-Canadian conceptions of history. Like Joseph Boyden’s Annie and Eden Robinson’s Lisamarie, Harry Robinson is asking us to rethink our assumptions about both narrative and interpretation. As a “trickster” figure, Coyote’s “trick” in this story is his ability to appear outside of traditional stories or myths which are governed by spiritual beings, instead turning up in the “reality” of history, in order to challenge our assumptions about what that reality is. Through Coyote, the narrative “resists the oppressive identity [that the settler myth has assigned Indigenous people] and attempts to replace it with one that commands respect” (Episkew 2). Coyote presents himself as king and representative for the Indigenous peoples of North America at a time when their representation in colonial discourse presented an image of “murderous” and “savage tribes in the wildest strain” (Goldsmith 1. 85, 79). When Coyote suggests a law to govern relationships between the settlers and the Indigenous communities in North America, it is the colonial power that turns to violence, as the King of England threatens to wage war. Coyote challenges the “savage Indian” stereotype by reflecting the savagery back onto the colonizers, who have been killing Coyote’s “children” for their land. Coyote’s request for reserve land contests the historically assumed idea of a North America as *terra nullius*, or empty land. This request

for a law governing relationships and land ownership also affords a sense of agency to First Nations populations, as Coyote writes them into the historical process of legislating the rights of Indigenous peoples in North America. While these laws, like the *Indian Act*, are eventually used to strip First Nations peoples of their land and their rights, Coyote's success in this story, and Harry Robinson's success as the storyteller, is in writing into the historical master narrative of European settlement and "successful" colonization a counter narrative that "acknowledges and validates Indigenous peoples' experiences by filling in the gaps and correcting falsehoods in this master narrative" (Episkenew 2). This recreating and retelling of the foundational "myths" of the Canadian nation-state sets in motion a process of healing through decolonization, allowing empowerment, rather than victimization and oppression, to be the outcome. To return to Lee Irwin's discussion on spirituality, found at the beginning of this chapter, as well as in the intro Introduction of this thesis, Irwin goes on to suggest that:

[f]or Native Americans, spirituality is at the core of an identity that is deeper than ethnicity. Native American spiritual traditions are as indigenous to this land as are the First Peoples themselves. Native spiritual traditions live in song, story, and ceremony. They live in the experiences of those who bring them into being. They live in the dream-space intensity of personal vision and in the shared cosmic ordering of words and actions that people of knowledge perform in ceremony. (98)

If a renewed spiritual foundation, as Taiaiake Alfred advocates, is an essential first step in the process of healing, the spirituality of an individual and of a community, and the values they share, and the strength they derive from each, are renewed and regenerated

through a restoration of language, and reconnection with place, and a revival of the storytelling tradition in which these spiritual traditions live.

CONCLUSION:

At the end of Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach*, Lisamarie's search for her brother, the missing and presumably drowned Jimmy, leads her to the island of Monkey Beach. After making an offering to the island spirits, in the form of blood, Lisamarie is visited by a vision of her brother's ship sinking and Jimmy swimming towards Monkey Beach but never reaching it. Exhausted and overwhelmed by the vision, Lisamarie attempts to wade back out to her waiting speedboat, but slipping as she attempts to get in, the boat gently knocks her on the head and pushes her underwater (370). Underwater, she is visited by the ghost of her grandmother, Ma-ma-oo, who sends Lisamarie back to the surface: "Go back," she tells her granddaughter. "You've come too far into this world. Go back" (372). In the last scene, readers are left with a vision of Lisamarie lying on the island beach: "The clamshells are hard against my back. I am no longer cold. I am so light I could just drift away. Close, very close, a b'gwus howls... In the distance, I hear the sound of a speedboat" (374). Readers may be left feeling unsettled with such an inconclusive ending; is Lisamarie dead? Is the speedboat she hears coming to rescue her? Does her re-emergence from the water signal her rebirth into a new epistemological configuration that allows for the coexistence of tribal traditions and beliefs--signified by the b'gwus-- with modern technologies in today's contemporary social environment, as represented by the speedboat? While I prefer the latter reading of the novel's end, such an open finale frustrates any definite conclusion, and Eden Robinson admits "that the novel's open ending has perplexed even her own family... However, she refuses to clarify Lisamarie's fate" (qtd. in Appleford 86). And it is not just *Monkey Beach* that has left readers

unsatisfied. In a review of *Through Black Spruce*, Mark Callanan's high praise for the novel does not extend to its conclusion, which he calls a "disappointing finale that does little justice to the rest of the novel" ("Review"); after facing the violent and destructive forces of the cannibalistic windigo spirit, Will's near-miraculous awakening from the coma and Suzanne's return to Moosonee seem romantic and too neat in a text that deals with such dark and complex subject matter.

Reflecting on the unsatisfying or ambiguous endings of these texts illuminates the difficulties of concluding a narrative that has its foundation in a storytelling tradition that focuses on processes of learning, as experiential knowledge is passed from one generation to the next. In Chapter Three I examined the ways Joseph Boyden, Eden Robinson, and Harry Robinson present their visions of healing through reconnection with traditional values, sacred ecologies, and spiritual beliefs. For each author, this project of healing is a process that stresses the importance of an ongoing relationship between a tribal narrative memory and the contemporary contexts in which the new generations find themselves. Thus, the story resists any neat conclusion because it is constantly being adapted to new environments and rewritten to include new experiences, with the intention of transmitting this knowledge from storyteller to listener/reader. For Harry Robinson, the act of translating his stories into English and having them transcribed by Wendy Wickwire into numerous collections was a way to ensure the perpetuation of his stories once he was no longer around to tell them himself. According to Wickwire, Harry also "spent afternoons in his local band office telling stories in his Okanagan language"

(“Stories” 30) and recorded the English versions of his stories on audiotapes throughout the 1980s.

Harry’s goal of having his stories reach both a Native and non-Native audience across North America (“Stories” 30) signals his demand for an ongoing relation with dialogue between the storyteller and his audience, as well as between the two communities, Settler and Indigenous, to whom his stories are addressed. Harry’s stories are not meant to be read once in a linear fashion from start to finish. Instead, he advocates meditation upon each story, which he suggests will reveal a different layer of meaning with each rereading. He tells Wickwire to:

take a listen to this [tape recording of his stories]
a few times and think about it—to these stories
and to what I tell you now[...]
it’s pretty hard[...]for you to know right now.
Takes time.
Then you will see. (“Stories” 19).

In fact, by expressing traditional modes of oral expression in contemporary narratives that are found on National Bestseller lists, Joseph Boyden and Eden Robinson are both engaging in a project similar to Harry’s. Unlike the master narrative of Canada’s colonial history, which tends to represent Settler “achievements” while excluding Indigenous presences and silencing Indigenous voices, the narratives of Joseph Boyden, Eden Robinson, and Harry Robinson, which lack satisfying or neat conclusions, demand a recognition of the ongoing relationships that Indigenous individuals and communities have maintained with the land, as well as with their unique cultural traditions, and

spiritual beliefs. These relationships did not end with colonization, the reserve system, residential schools, or the *Indian Act* but have, in spite of these things, been maintained and perpetuated through story and narrative memory. As the invocation of an oral tradition implies, Harry Robinson, Joseph Boyden, and Eden Robinson do not intend their texts to be read as discrete units with defined endings. Instead, their stories, founded in traditional spiritual narratives, should be approached as the beginning of a dialogue encouraging Native and non-Native readers alike to consider First Nations spiritual narratives as pedagogical tools which offer a vision of a decolonized future grounded in mutual respect and peaceful coexistence.

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