

AT HOME IN STORIES: COUNTERING EXILE IN CANADIAN  
NARRATIVES

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INDIGENOUS AND SETTLER WRITERS COUNTER EXILE IN  
CANADIAN NARRATIVES...

By

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## Abstract

*At Home in Stories* asks how stories contribute to addressing the problem of becoming at-home for an exiled people or person. This question is set in the context of the internal exile experienced by First Nations and immigrant communities as a result of the dominance of Empire, nation-building, resource-extraction and consumer-culture stories. How do members of an exiled community remember their story and continue their history in the face of and in response to all that estranges and threatens to erase them as a people? How do exiles write their stories to develop their own particular identity in contrast to a dominant story? Through close textual analysis I trace how these questions are imaginatively taken up in the following contemporary Canadian fictional stories: Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners*, Rudy Wiebe's *A Discovery of Strangers*, Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach*, and Shelley Niro's *It Starts With a Whisper* and *Suite: INDIAN*.

Drawing on critical work from fields including Indigenous Studies, hermeneutics, M.M. Bakhtin's philosophy of language, and postcolonial and postmodern theories, I explore the relationship between home-making and storytelling by highlighting three aspects of becoming at-home. Humankind is born into and a part of a particular ecological household made up of the relationships that sustain life in a specific locale, in itself a story-soaked place; becoming at-home includes cultural belonging whose integrity is marked by boundaries and a cultural hearth-fire; finally, as different cultures share the same land, developing a sense of mystery that indwells difference between peoples is crucial.

This thesis takes up the ability of stories to get at the complexity of the meeting between different persons and cultures, the ways in which dominant stories silence the many non-human and human voices that make up life on earth, and how through their alternative vision other stories provide counternarratives to this silencing.



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## Introduction: The Songs of Lament

*By the rivers of Babylon –  
there we sat down and there we wept  
when we remembered Zion.  
On the poplars there  
we hung up our harps.  
For there our captors  
asked us for songs,  
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,  
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”  
How could we sing the Lord’s song  
in a foreign land?*

Psalm 137: 1-4<sup>1</sup>

The exiled one writes a song about how out-of-place she feels. In it she tells how being a captive in a strange land (Babylon) has silenced her. She had put away her harp when she remembered the place where she was known, the place where there were few threats to her freedom to love and to be loved, this place she knew as “Zion.” When she “remembered Zion,” she wept. In place of

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<sup>1</sup> This and all subsequent quotations from the Biblical narrative are taken from the *New Revised Standard Version*.

“the songs of joy, the songs of the Lord,” she writes a song to express her lament.<sup>2</sup> She sings of how her captors taunted her, asking for a sample of her “ethnic” music: “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!” She remembers “Salem,” the city of peace, her “highest joy.” This was a place of shalom, where being at peace meant not just the absence of war but where she and her people could actively seek the joy and delight of harmonious relationships: with YHWH, with self, with neighbour, with nature.<sup>3</sup> She asks YHWH to remember the carnage of the day this city of peace fell. And finally, her song addresses the “Daughter of Babylon,” symbol of empire. In her helpless rage she answers the empire’s taunts by bitterly writing ‘may your infants also be seized and dashed against the rocks.’ With this, she ends her song. She is singing: not the song that may allow her captors to imagine they are able to manage her, but a song that defies their control. It addresses the One beyond their control; the One she trusts has ears to hear the cry that expresses all that roils up in her from the experience of being a stranger in a strange land.

The object of this study is the relationship between stories and ways of making home for those who have been made strangers in their own land, or, for those who have been displaced from their land into others’ lands. Its central questions will be: how do members of an exiled community remember their story

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<sup>2</sup> I am imagining this exiled person as a woman, in the tradition of Miriam, Moses’ sister, who led the Israelites in a song celebrating freedom from the imperial army of the Egyptian empire. Pharaoh’s army “got drowned,” as the black spiritual recalls. This tradition of resistance also includes the Israelite midwives who refused Pharaoh’s decree that they kill all male newborns.

<sup>3</sup> According to the Exodus story, the name of the Creator is described by the acronym YHWH; it was not spoken in order to signal that this One could not be domesticated by humankind, and would remain a mystery. (See Chapter Three for discussion of mystery.)

and continue their history in the face of and in response to all that estranges and threatens to erase them as a people? Assuming that “identity is narratively formed,” how do stories contribute to a person or a people’s search for home (Middleton, “Identity” 190)? What kinds of displacement specifically do the characters or peoples in the fictional texts lament? How do those displaced through the dominant empire story write their stories in contrast to that story, in order to develop their own particular identity? How does this counternarrative not only critique empire-building but work to energize the community itself? And can this energy become life-giving to others rather than being exclusively ethnocentric?

## **Dominant Narratives of Canada’s Founding**

I have begun with a reading of Psalm 137 as a way of illustrating some of the main themes of exile and displacement.<sup>4</sup> It expresses the loss of being taken out of the place that is layered with a people’s stories and into a new place that does not hold their memory and cannot speak to them of who they are. The loss of place and the loss of language, “one’s particular, complex cultural homestead,” marks the history of the internal exile that First Nations have experienced in the founding of Canada (Seerveld 10). This project examines how the dominant

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<sup>4</sup> I use the terms displacement and exile interchangeably. Cherokee scholar Jace Weaver speaks of “Native Americans” as “victims of internal colonialism” and describes how “the native population is swamped by a large mass of colonial settlers who, after generations, no longer have a *métropole* to which to return” (“From” 13). *Merriam-Websters Online Dictionary* defines “exile” as “the state or a period of forced or voluntary absence from one’s country or home.”; in the same text “displacement” is “the act or process of displacing; the state of being displaced” (22 March 2010).

narrative of Canada's founding is interrupted as something of these losses is expressed in the following novels and films: Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners*, Rudy Wiebe's *A Discovery of Strangers*, Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach*, and Shelley Niro's *It Starts With a Whisper* and *Suite: INDIAN*. As they issue a complaint against the forces that seek to displace characters grounded in distinct communities, these contemporary Canadian narratives each portray conditions of displacement. This project also examines how in the face of displacement each text uncovers the foundations or traces the shape of alternative stories of home and belonging.

Lament is expressed in many voices as two disparate ways of life grind inexorably up against each other in Rudy Wiebe's *A Discovery of Strangers* (1995), a retelling of the encounter between the Tetsot'ine people and John Franklin's first overland expedition. While Wiebe's historical fiction reconstructs a beginning moment of a fractured relationship between the British and the Tetsot'ine, Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners* (1974) portrays the continuing legacy of the difficult relationship between immigrant/settler cultures and the Métis. *Diviners* focuses on the constant uneasiness in the relationship between the Scots character Morag Gunn and the Métis character Jules (Skinner) Tonnerre, who both grow up on the margins of the largely Scots immigrant community of Manawaka in Manitoba. From a Haudenosaunee perspective, Mohawk filmmaker Shelley Niro's *It Starts With a Whisper* (1993) and *Suite: INDIAN* (2005) each address specific displacements: from the impact of the initial



“discovery” of Columbus to the pervasive presence of stereotypes of Indigenous peoples that continue to shape the public imagination.<sup>5</sup> Through *Monkey Beach*’s young narrator Lisa Marie, Haisla writer Eden Robinson traces the violence of the many dislocations that have rocked the Haisla Kitamaat community (2000). This thesis will explore how all of these portrayals serve as important sites amidst the complexities of the ongoing relationship between peoples Indigenous to Canada and immigrant communities. As this brief description of the fictional texts shows, lament arises out of particular exiles and displacements. Neither the lament of Psalm 137 nor the story of exile into the Babylonian empire is meant to be a model nor an archetype in this thesis for other laments and stories of exile.

In fact, in the wake of the abuse of generations of First Nations, Métis and Inuit<sup>6</sup> children under the auspices of the institutional church - the legacy of residential schooling, which the current Truth and Reconciliation Commission is mandated to record - why would I begin this project by citing the Biblical narrative? I take up this question with a heavy heart, since any response to the silencing and the deep displacements that have been done in the name of Christ must begin, as Tomson Highway states, with ‘exposing the poison.’<sup>7</sup> While there are studies that document many of the realities of residential schooling,

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<sup>5</sup> John Ralston Saul speaks to the continuing effects of “getting the story – of Canada’s founding – wrong” since this false “collective mythology...cannot provide the framework for thinking though problems we have today” (“Canada”).

<sup>6</sup> It is important to distinguish between these communities, since they each have distinct and disparate histories, relationships with the federal government of Canada, and, forms of knowledge that are expressed through each of their cultures.

<sup>7</sup> Tomson Highway’s script *Dry Lips Oughta Move To Kapuskasing* begins with the epigraph “before the healing can take place, the poison must first be exposed” (6).

Highway's fictional portrayal in *Kiss of the Fur Queen* begins to break the silence as it gets at the deep truth of the evil done to two small Cree brothers by clergy. *Kiss* describes the exile of Champion/Jeremiah and Ooneemeetoo/ Gabriel as they are taken away from their parents and community: separated from the Cree way of raising children, from the stories that are a part of their home, their land and way of life. Religious imagery becomes inextricably associated with sexual coercion and dominance when the principal of the residential school abuses them, deepening the rift in their young lives. The silence that has been imposed on them in terms of being forbidden to speak Cree for ten months of the year only deepens in the face of their parents' absolute trust in the village priest, trust that leads the boys to conclude that their parents would never believe them were they to speak of the abuse they are experiencing.

As this project addresses the relationship between stories and home - making away from home in the context of Indigenous<sup>8</sup> and settler relations in Canada, it *reads through* the many layers of stories that historically have and continue to inform this relationship. Besides the major story layers of Indigenous civilizations over millennia and immigrant/refugee stories of landing, the Biblical

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<sup>8</sup> I use the term "Indigenous" to signify First Nations' peoples. While Indigenous scholars such as Taiaiake Alfred decry the use of the term "aboriginal," (*Wasáse* 23), writer Richard Van Camp, for example, uses it freely ("Living" interview), as does Indigenous jurisprudence scholar Sákéj Henderson (*First Nations Jurisprudence*). When he is not using the term "Indian" in an ironic way, writer and scholar Thomas King uses the term "Native" ("You're Not the Indian I Had in Mind" in *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative*). In deference to this wide range of terms, I use all of them (except Indian) interchangeably unless a scholar, writer or character is identified as a member of a specific First Nation.

narrative is another story that *soaks* the history of these relations.<sup>9</sup> And just as it is important to trace the ways that Indigenous forms of knowledge have soaked into Canada's complicated way of being a con-federation, this thesis takes up the task of beginning to trace how the Biblical narrative has been used in ways that have brought both woe and weal on Indigenous communities.

The abuse of children under the auspices of the institutional church is not the only way Christianity has been used to justify the exile imposed on First Nations. In this thesis's framework of the relationship between stories and home making, *how* the interpretation of a story shapes *what people do* becomes a crucial issue. A typological hermeneutic, taken up, for example, by those who left England to settle on Indigenous lands so that they read themselves into the Biblical narrative as a type of Israel coming into a "new Canaan" has contributed to untold violence. As he traces this "corruption of Puritan millennial typology ... in the colonial period" ("The Bible" 332), David Lyle Jeffrey notes how "American Puritans lent themselves to a strong focus on national destiny" (318) and how "pervasive ... the American tendency [is] to engraft personal and national ideas into the biblical history" (319). In "Canaanites, Cowboys and Indians," Osage scholar Robert Warrior takes up this kind of typological reading of the Exodus story, asking how Native Americans can find themselves in it. He shows how "many Puritan preachers

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<sup>9</sup> Steven Bouma-Prediger and Brian Walsh in *Beyond Homelessness* use the metaphor "story-soaked meaning" in their discussion of place (See Introduction to Chapter One, 45). I find this metaphor is also excellent for the way so many stories have left their watermark, as it were, on the history of Indigenous/immigrant relations, a history that continues to unfold.

were fond of referring to Native Americans as Amlekites and Canaanites – in other words, people who, if they would not be converted, were worthy of annihilation”; Warrior describes how making this parallel contributed to the massive displacement and genocide among Native American tribes (99).

Besides the land appropriations and annihilation that were aided by this typological reading, the *narrative* quality of the Bible was reduced by an empiricist mindset and imposed on First Nations. Cree theologian (Swan Lake First Nation, Alberta) Ray Aldred claims that this mindset also renders Christianity as a “white-man’s” religion, as it changes the Gospel from being *story* into “a set of propositions” that typifies a “Western paradigm of truth-telling” (“Resurrection of Story” 1). Aldred goes on to show how the language of propositions is foreign to Indigenous cultures and its imposition ignores the frame that Indigenous peoples give to knowledge: the oral communal story-telling tradition.<sup>10</sup> “For Aboriginal people the gospel story is lost” not only through this framework that characterizes “fundamentalist and evangelical theology” but also through a white “classic” liberal theology that echoes a Western individualism that “in seeking to affirm everyone’s position ends up reducing everyone’s spirituality to an individualized personalized faith” (2). The three above examples are a very cursory sketch of ways in which the

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<sup>10</sup> Anishnabe scholar Niigonwedom Sinclair quotes Lee Maracle, a writer the Stó:lō Nation: “there is a story in every line of theory. The difference between us and European (predominantly white male) scholars is that we admit this, and present theory through story....No thought is understood outside of humanity’s interaction. So we present thought through story, human beings doing something, real characters working out the process of thought and being” (49).

Biblical narrative has been used in service of different exercises of power-over relationships<sup>11</sup>: the practice of abuse through residential schooling, interpretations of the Biblical narrative that served a nationalist-imperialist agenda that justified appropriation of lands and the annihilation of First Nations, and, the framework that reduced the gospel story through Western empirical philosophical and individualistic traditions.

Contrary to readings that continue to fuse the Biblical narrative in uncomplicated ways to the dominant story of Canada's founding, this narrative is itself "soaked" by other stories.<sup>12</sup> Beside the empiricist and imperialist slants, the narrative foundational to Christianity came to be associated with the Western story of progress. For example, the brothers Okimasis in Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen* were not allowed to speak Cree in residential school; the Cree language was associated with the past and the past, in the story of progress, signified a less civilized time, whereas the English language implicitly showed an increasingly sophisticated future. The Biblical narrative continues to be saturated by notions such as this idea of progress. Depending on which meanings it is infused with, it has the potential to either ground or displace specific peoples and communities who seek ways of making home. While George Elliot Clarke in his anthology *Fire on the Water* describes how

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<sup>11</sup> This thesis defines power-over relations as those marked by dominance as opposed to a more complex relationship of mutuality. In power-over relations, for example, dialogue is viewed as a hindrance to the unilateral agenda of the domineering one.

<sup>12</sup> This same fusion of many stories and many interpretations takes place whenever the phrase "Aboriginal culture" is used in an uncomplicated way.

this narrative shaped the beginnings of Africadian literature, Tommy Douglas, popularly associated with Canada's adoption of universal health care, credited a social gospel reading of the Biblical narrative for his advocacy of this policy. Just as Sakej Henderson emphasizes how Indigenous knowledge has soaked into Canadian practices of jurisprudence and John Ralston Saul makes a strong case for how Métis knowledge has soaked into how relations are shaped in Canada, the Biblical narrative has permeated Canadian consciousness in complicated ways.

### **Dominant Narratives of Global Consumerism**

Besides the major story layers that influence relations between Indigenous and settler communities in Canada, there is a pervasive empire story that threatens the health of both broadly defined communities and threatens the relations between them: that is, the story of how Western consumerism is leveling the rich fabric of cultural communities on a national as well as a global scale. Bouma et al. illustrate the demands that the practice of as well as the attitude engendered by consumerism make on the environment, and how these demands are lethal and unsustainable: "the annual increase of the U.S. population of 2.6 million people puts more pressure on the world's resources than do the 17 million people added in India each year" (Christopher Flavin qtd in Bouma et al 172). The disastrous displacements that occur when the story of consumer choice and privilege captures a public's imagination threaten both

Indigenous and non-Native communities. This thesis is written in the context of the global force of this displacement, a force that I would argue has spiritual power.

In their separate challenges to this force Mohawk professor of Indigenous governance Taiaiake Alfred and Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann both insist that alternatives must be forged through spiritual revolution. Such a revolution would challenge secular modern notions that presume humankind can be disconnected from a Creator, from the generations before and the generations to come, and from other life on earth. While Alfred critiques this force as the effect of a “modern liberal ideology of ...individualism and unrestrained consumption” that only ever engenders “selfishness and competitiveness” (*Wásase* 131), Brueggemann confronts both liberal and conservative North American Christianity, arguing that it is “so largely enculturated to the American ethos of consumerism that it has little power to believe or act” out of the Biblical narrative which he argues centers on a generous, sustaining Creator (*Prophetic* 1). While John Ralston Saul points to a fundamental alternative to this consumerist story in the Indigenous concept of the earth and all of its creatures as “a dish with one spoon,” the Exodus story in the Biblical narrative also offers alternatives to this pervasive context. Cherokee Professor and Director of the Institute of Native American Studies at University of Georgia Jace Weaver grapples with land ownership and how in Native frames of reference the land “was held in common by all. It was not property

but community” (“From I-Hermeneutics” 21). Weaver connects this worldview with Shawnee Chief Tecumseh’s attempt “to rally the Native nations into a grand alliance to halt White expansionism”: “The only way to stop this evil is for all the red men to unite in claiming a common and equal right in the land, as it was at first, and should be now – for it never was divided, but belongs to all” (qtd in Weaver 21). Jace Weaver goes on to note a correlation between “worldviews” of Natives and “ancient Hebrews” in an interesting example of the way Native frames of reference and Biblical narratives can “soak” into one another and provide alternative ways of reading who and where humankind is. He quotes Leviticus 25:23 where the Hebrews, after they have been liberated from the Egyptian empire, are instructed to always remember whose land they are ultimately on and how they should live on the land: “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants.”

### **Counternarrative: The Exodus Story and Economies of “Enough”**

The Exodus story is also an antidote to the restless striving of consumerism’s “not enough.” In this story, the Hebrew people were freed from forced labour in the ancient Egyptian empire and once freed, their strange Liberator (the names in the Biblical narrative for God are many), insisted on providing for them. As they woke to fresh manna each morning, a practice that continued for forty years, they were introduced to an economy of “enough” (Exodus 16:35; Deuteronomy 8:3,4). Six days a week the one “that gathered much... had nothing over” while the one who “gathered little had no lack; each



gathered according to what he or she could eat” (Exodus 16:18). The people soon learned to only gather what they needed, since the one that gathered much out of fear that it would not be given the next day found that the leftovers rotted. Hoarding literally produced a rotten smell; hoarding and reeking came to be connected.

Even as they were experiencing this economy of “enough,” they were being taught through the laws that were to order this peoples’ way of life, laws that Moses was receiving on his journeys up Mount Sinai. Practicing an economy of “enough” included the regular redistribution of wealth, established in the teaching and practice of the Sabbath, of the Sabbatical, of the year of Jubilee; the people were instructed to give creatures including all people rest every seventh day and the land rest every seventh year.<sup>13</sup> Rest was fused with liberation in the instructions for the year of Jubilee, when neighbours who had lost their land and gone into debt needed to be relieved of this debt and their land returned to them (Leviticus 25). These laws resisted monopoly and protected the most vulnerable. Diaspora was predicted for this people if they failed to live by these laws. And even after the people were scattered this way of life continued to be

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<sup>13</sup> As an echo of the manna-gathering, the Sabbath law had implications for how one harvested: an olive tree need be beaten only once, and harvesters need not return to gather up grain that was missed during the first cutting. Whatever remained on the tree and in the field was to be gleaned by those who were landless (Deuteronomy 24:17-22; Leviticus 19:9,10).

recalled and reinterpreted repeatedly in the Biblical narrative as an alternative to imperialistic ways.<sup>14</sup>

This specific story that connects Sabbath rest and liberation, of trusting that there will be and is enough, is itself another layer in the Biblical narrative. It resonates with the role that rest plays in the Creation story, of how creation unfolds and proliferates over six periods and concludes with a seventh, with a period of rest. This pattern of unfolding and rest breathes a calm into the story that flies in the face of a pervasive and restless mythology that “time is money,” where time is abstracted from the earth’s rhythms.

In the Creation story the economy of enough time includes the givens of a dynamic dialogue between the Creator, humankind, creature-kind and the vital, breathing organic earth. A cherry tree “speaks” of time, for example, in terms of seasons, defying the anxious one-sided economic productivity imperative as it takes its sweet time (five years) of maturing in order to begin to produce fruit. This counting of time in terms of ripeness is inherently counter-intuitive to consumerist time and its illusion of control through “choice.”<sup>15</sup> Rather, this time evokes interdependence; the ripe cherry is the long-expected fruit of a seed that,

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<sup>14</sup> For example, the prophet Isaiah warned the Hebrew people because “you do as you please and exploit all your workers” their God would allow the Babylonian empire to carry them into exile (Isaiah 58:3). Isaiah condemned the shallowness of their religiosity, arguing that true Sabbath-keeping was “to loose the bonds of injustice...to set the oppressed free....to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter (Isaiah 58:6,7); he prophesied the coming of a Messiah who would reinterpret the faith tradition in the spirit of this Jubilee. Indeed, Christ’s critique of Solomon’s empire-building is explicit when he urges his disciples to “consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these” (Luke 12:27).

<sup>15</sup> Under consumerism’s spell “choice” is reduced to choice between a multitude of products and “lifestyles” and takes on urgency: as if these will be life-changing choices.

when planted, depends on so many things. Humans, dependent in turn on this slow and precarious growth of the seed, are invited to take part in and to trace the path of ripeness, involving time that moves in terms of being “in season.”

Radically disrupting the cult of efficiency that translates as too unmanageable the variables of season and soil, all living things and creatures tell the eloquent story of an inherent interdependency, an implicit vulnerability. These relations testify to an alternative way of life in a climate where economic wisdom is separated from earth-keeping stewardship, into the gap that is created when time is separated from seasons, and where homelessness is manifested in bankrupt soil, polluted air and water: a bankrupt economy marked by ever –widening and clogged highways.

While Chapter One, “Home-making and Land: Finding Oneself at Home in this Household, this Story-Soaked Place,” is written in the context of these forces, it also takes up the theorizing that “values exile, diaspora and migration for the promise that they hold out of critical detachment and the possibilities of self-invention” (ten Kortenaar, “We Are Waiting” 3). Even as this introduction highlights the displacements that give rise to lament, it reads against the assumption of displacement as a permanent thing. Rather, since it assumes that humankind is always located, part of a neighbourhood, a particular ecological household, a more-than human community, this chapter asks whether the desire for “critical detachment” *is* promising. What exactly does critical detachment promise, and to whom are these promises made? What kinds of possibilities are

opened up by the notion of “self-invention”? Is there any difference between the pervasive focus on consumerist choice and this self-invention? Is there room in the notion of self-invention for a view of humankind as communal beings, and of the communal reinterpretation of tradition? In the context of these questions, what *does* it mean to be landed? In “Home and Away,” Sara Ahmed points to and critiques theorizing that claims “critical nomadism is about choice....[and that] ‘homelessness is a chosen condition’,” arguing that the realities of being exiled and of homelessness are abstracted and made exotic by some postcolonial/diaspora theorists, turned into metaphors for those who want to develop theories based on the notion that there is no precise place of arrival or departure (83).

In the context of both my reading of the Creation story and Indigenous traditions, being landed means being a part of a dialogue, being able to hear the earth as it speaks. This chapter asks whether Robinson and Wiebe portray the earth as a speaking subject and whether the human characters that people their fictional narratives hear the earth speak. How has the place they inhabit shaped the characters’ stories? As it develops the notion that a place is “story-soaked,” another question this chapter asks is how the stories that a people live by have shaped a particular place. Its consideration of the relationship between land and stories gives rise to the questions of what happened in this place and how do these events shape the ongoing story of this place? In his Massey Lectures: *The Truth About Stories*, Thomas King argues that reading can be an active listening that

has the power to change the life of the reader, to shape one's moral obligations. The conversation developed between the reader and the voices in the text will begin to change the way the reader imagines "home." This chapter will take up the question of the relationship between those who inhabit a specific place and the stories of what has happened here over time. Just as a story extends an invitation to the reader, so do the stories of a place. In *We Are All Treaty People*, Roger Epp makes a strong argument for doing justice that is located in a specific place among the communities that make up a part of its life as he claims that the "most meaningful work of reconciliation ... will lie in small, face-to-face initiatives for which the imperative is greatest where communities exist in close proximity" (138). He points to the concrete task that is reconciliation "without the cover of scholarship or the luxury of geographical distance" (127). I would like to extend King's statement of how hearing a particular story obliges the hearer to argue that the meaning of being in a particular place includes responding to Métis peoples as well as First Nations communities that have lived here for millennia.

On 26 January 2009, former MP Elijah Harper, Cree of the Red Sucker Lake First Nation, said this to his audience at McMaster University: "We are the First Nations of Canada – hosts to all other peoples who come and who have come here" ("Towards"). While Chapter One begins within the context of the Creator's invitation to humankind to find itself at home within creation, Chapter Two is set in the context of the invitation of First Nations to a reciprocal

relationship with European peoples, an invitation that has been brushed aside for hundreds of years.<sup>16</sup>

While Chapter One reads portrayals of the resulting dis/placement in the fictional texts as it addresses exile and homelessness in terms of place, Chapter Two focuses on human-built cultural households, asking how stories help scattered communities reimagine cultural interiors. In the face of the exclusions, displacement and violent inclusions that colonial forces have historically enacted in the founding of Canada, this chapter, entitled “An Architecture of Belonging,” explores important questions of inclusion and exclusion. These questions are taken up in a context of a critical nomadism that considers all borders and boundaries inherently oppressive, where all doors are mistakenly identified as fortress gates. For example, in *Ephemeral Territories*, Erin Manning identifies notions of “home,” and of “being-at-home” with “exclusionary systems” within which the discourse of identity and belonging are “stultifying” and “suffocating” (“Preface” ix-xi). What is specifically meant by “exclusionary”? Is developing a transitory sense of “space” rather than a located place the remedy for “exclusionary systems”? With these broader questions as a frame, this chapter will ask how Robinson, Niro and Laurence take up the violent exclusions and

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<sup>16</sup> As he writes from the U.S. side of the border, Jace Weaver argues that despite “the diasporic nature of much of modern Native existence, one must nevertheless admit that there is something real, concrete, and centered in Native existence and identity” (“From” 14). John Ralston Saul takes Weaver’s claim for the central place of Native identity much further as he argues that in terms of the way Canada is shaped, Métis worldviews have radically altered European approaches to governance as he points for example, to the healthy tension between individual and collective rights, to identification with complexity instead of a monolithic identity (“Canada: A Métis Civilization”).

inclusions that they portray. Are home and belonging are ephemeral dreams for their characters?

... This chapter argues that a community gathers its scattered self by continuing to build on its past through the work of recall, of gathering founding stories and of rereading them in this new context. This recollection is seen as an essential part of rebuilding in the wake of two forces that militate against memory, against remembering and reinterpreting founding traditions and stories. Both cultural and spiritual communities face displacement through an erasure of memory as consumerism focuses on the “now, either an urgent now or an eternal now,” and, as the tradition of modernity rejects both a past and a (specific) tradition (Brueggemann *Prophetic* 1). Caribbean theorist of transnational feminism M. Jacqui Alexander succinctly elaborates on the strained relationship between other traditions and the forces of the “here and now” in Western tradition in *Pedagogies of Crossing* as she writes that “tradition is ostensibly placed in another time, one that is not contemporaneous with ‘our’ own. The west is presumably ‘here and now,’ while the Third World is ‘then and there,’ apparently exclusive of the ‘here and now.’ Both time and distance, then, are ineluctably circumscribed” (190).

“An Architecture of Belonging” argues that the tyranny of the “here and now,” is challenged within the domain of a “hearth fire” as founding stories are recalled and asks how the fictional narratives portray this reclaiming and reinterpreting work. What keeps this place where founding stories are gathered

from becoming a place of nostalgia which attempts to retrieve a sentimentalized or romanticized past? This chapter's focus on how belonging is enacted in the domain of the hearth fire understands with Sarah Ahmed that "there is movement and dislocation within the very forming of homes as complex and contingent spaces of inhabitation" (88). In it I ask: what are the complex intimacies and also the processes of unfolding that describe the domain of the hearth fire? How are boundaries around characters and cultural communities reframed and under what conditions are doors opened or shut in the fictional narratives? <sup>17</sup>

While Chapter Two begins a discussion of the role of a cultural hearth fire where founding stories are recalled and reinterpreted, Chapter Three focuses on a threshold, the "contact zone" where different communities meet. It argues that the legacy of power-over relationships that have led to many displacements and estrangements can only begin to change through an approach that honours mystery, or, becoming "other-wise." Human involvement in mystery has already been manifested in this Introduction. Mystery is indicated through Chapter One's focus on the givens that humans are born into: the gift of the ecological household, of the rich interdependencies included in being located in a specific time and place. The gift of taking the sweet time that is given, of the way relations are made to unfold into ripeness: these are understood as experiences of mystery. While Chapter Two "Finding Oneself at Home" discusses place as gift,

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<sup>17</sup> These questions are implicit in the debate among cultural theorists and literary critics of Indigenous culture over the value of a literary nationalist movement in contrast to pan-Indigenous cosmopolitanism. Another manifestation of the debate about cultural boundaries is the discussion around appropriation of voice.



Chapter Three - “Home-making Mystery in Estranging Mastery: Rumours of a Larger Story”- assumes that “human life means to be gifted with connections and called to (re) connections,” also through attending to a story larger than the present dominating story (Othuis 145) . The Babylonian exile’s lament engages in mystery as it defies the singer’s captors and addresses the One beyond their control.

In her discussion of Western modernity, Jacqui Alexander also connects its dismissal of tradition with the dismissal of the sacred: “tradition is made subordinate to, and unintelligible within, that which is modern. Yet, it is not only that (post) modernity’s secularism renders the Sacred as tradition, but it is also that tradition, understood as an extreme alterity, is always made to reside elsewhere and denied entry into the modern” (296).<sup>18</sup> This view, for example has isolated internally exiled First Nations from their traditions or fixed these same traditions in essentialized frozen forms. It also disallows or stereotypes other communities whose roots are in faith-based traditions, traditions grounded in story-telling.

Chapter Three will argue that mystery includes the “power to stay”: in terms of persons’ and communities’ abilities to remain open to the differences between them, in terms of facing the conflict of the legacy of power-over relations between the Canadian state and First Nations. From within this

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<sup>18</sup> Postmodernity is a wide umbrella for many disparate streams. While Alexander critiques a secular postmodernism that conflates tradition with the sacred, later I will cite a reading methodology based on another postmodern tenet, one that critiques continued claims that humans and science can be objective and unbiased.

context this chapter asks how the fictional texts portray the relationship between attending to mystery and home-making. What do Robinson and Wiebe provide as an antidote to the disorientation and exile that their characters experience? How do their texts take characters beyond the determinations of a dominant story? How do they evoke experiences of mystery that wedge open a place for a people to breathe again? What are these experiences of mystery that create room for difference and contribute to the characters' or their communities' being-at-home?

If by "home" we mean a place where healing of trust can begin and where conciliation and reconciliation are highly valued, then "home" cannot be given up as a romantic notion. However, because conciliation and reconciliation are a complex process, over the course of this thesis I move from using the noun "home" to using the verb "becoming at-home." Chapter One begins this dissertation's discussion of the relationship between home and stories by referring to the noun home in order to highlight the importance of the relationships that make up the ecological household grounded in a specific locale of our earth-home. However, as Chapter Two addresses how belonging is shaped through the gathering of a scattered people, this process of cultural home-making can only be described as a becoming at-home. The verb also addresses both the longing and the complex process whereby former enemies come to recognize that their lives are interdependent. This discussion of how to become at-home as neighbours accountable for the well-being of the complex

life of this earth-home is framed within a discussion of the mystery that always opposes a power-over mastery (Chapter Three). None of the fictional stories that are read within the framework of each chapter addresses the notion of home and home-making as a static phenomenon even though in each, characters grounded in a concrete body are in dialogue in a specific locale. These stories both address and *are* a way of becoming at-home.

### **If This is Your Land, Where are Your Stories?**

In his book entitled *If This is Your Land, Where are Your Stories*, J. Edward Chamberlin highlights many of the ongoing tensions between First Nations and immigrant communities in Canada. *If This Is Your Land* testifies to the legacy of land appropriations and raises the issue of land claims that remain consistently stalled in the courts. Its focus on the relationship between land and stories as part of the particular history of relations in a specific place speaks to the context of this thesis, pointedly asking where I stand as I read the texts chosen for this dissertation. Indeed, where are the stories that have shaped my life located? And, what shapes my reading methodology as I approach these texts?

Born just after my parents immigrated to Canada, I grew up hearing in our mother tongue, Frisian, stories that had to do with our connection to another country (the Netherlands) and another time (my parents' and grandparents'

generations).<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile, in terms of our family's presence in Canada, the 1950s story of my parents' immigration sits beside the story of the deepening internal exile of First Nations. In *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, Tomson Highway locates the small Cree brothers Jeremiah and Gabriel's exile to residential school hundreds of kilometers south of their Eemanapiteepitat community in northern Manitoba during the same years that my parents first arrived and settled in Bradford, Ontario. Looking back, I see the contradictions as we were offered a home place by a government that at the same time was displacing generations of First Nations children from their home communities.<sup>20</sup>

Another contradiction is that my parents arrived from the post-war (World War II) context with a strong sense that it had been worth risking their lives to fight the palpable regime of racial superiority that the occupying Nazi force had propagated in the Netherlands.<sup>21</sup> And yet, the Canadian government's racial superiority, manifested in the education policy that structured the residential school system in Canada, did not register in my family.<sup>22</sup> The story that grounded

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<sup>19</sup> Rudy Wiebe, also Canadian born of immigrant (Russian Mennonite) parents, notes that they "don't tell you stories about this place because they have no more history in this place than you have" ("Walking" 55).

<sup>20</sup> On June 11, 2008, Canada's federal government officially apologized for how the Residential Schools system worked "to remove and isolate children from the influence of their homes, families...rich and vibrant cultures and traditions... and to assimilate them into the dominant culture" during the roughly 100 years of the system. The government apologized for the "assumption [that] Aboriginal cultures and spiritual beliefs were inferior and unequal."

<sup>21</sup> This was one of the stories we heard growing up, since my parents had experienced these years living next to Germany. The dream of a way out of the grinding poverty that my grandmother, widowed with six young children during the depression of the 1920s and 1930s, the German dream embodied by the Volks-wagen for a time veiled the darker dream of a super-volk. Eventually it became clear that *this* was the dominant story of the Nazi regime.

<sup>22</sup> The story of my parents' immigration highlights the many notions of nationalism even as it complicates the worn-out term: Eurocentric, or, Euroamerican. The language of my parents

my parents' lives exposed the Aryan supremacist dehumanizing and racializing of anyone who was not blond-haired and blue-eyed, who did not "fit," physically or mentally. Yet on their arrival in Canada the central theme of the Biblical narrative as they understood it met a thick narrative – the myth of the somewhat boring but to a "t" proper, polite and upright Britishness that defined Canadian 1950s national life. While their understanding of the Creator's delight in multiplicity - of peoples, languages and cultures, and the deep respect evoked by the Creator's gift of each human being "made in the image of the Creator" formed a powerful counternarrative to the dream of Nazism, giving them reason to participate in the Dutch underground, the dirty secrets of enforced assimilation policy were a well hidden part of the legacy of Canadian nationalism: a *Canadian* underground. National myths that shape how a people imagine themselves, founding stories that shaped my parents lives' in WW II: these narratives implicitly underline the connection between stories of a particular tradition and ethics, so that as Alasdair MacIntyre expresses it, the answer to the question of "what am I to do?" depends on how one first answers the question "of what story or stories do I find myself a part?" (qtd in Middleton et al, *Truth* 68).

Besides the foundational stories that one chooses, there are the stories that one inherits in moving from one place to another. Besides being born into an

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home province was distinct from the Dutch language and at the time of my parents immigration, was seeing a revival so that twenty years later, schoolchildren were hearing it in primary grades and bookstores specialized in Frisian history and literature. This made later debates of Quebec separatism understandable; this nationalism was different from both the empire-building movement of the Nazi regime and the nation-state of the Netherlands. As Abenaki scholar Lisa Brooks notes, "the concept of a monolithic Europe is just as problematic as that of a monolithic Native America" ("At the Gathering Place" 248n8).

immigrant family and community, I was born into and already connected to the story of relations between Indigenous peoples and immigrants through my aunt “Tante Akke,” whose name I share. At first estranged from Tante through strained family relationships, my sister Frances and I finally began to get to know her better when we had the opportunity to help her before she died in 1998. After her death, we found among her photos one of Tante at her nursing work during the 1950s in the Hamilton Mountain Sanitarium (known as “the San”) for people with tuberculosis (TB). She had taken a picture of the two Inuit children whom she was bathing.<sup>23</sup> Five years after Tante’s death I moved to Hamilton, this same city to which she’d immigrated, and I had the privilege to study the meaning of stories and of place in the context of my relations within the complicated story of *this* land where I was born. I came to wonder about the context of this encounter between her and those Inuit who came to “the San” because they had tuberculosis. What was her frame of reference as she focused her camera on the children? Did she know why they were so susceptible to TB? I wondered about the conditions under which they were taken and transported to Hamilton. And, how do I read this photo? Where am I located as I look at it and try to trace the story the photo itself refers to?

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<sup>23</sup> When we were mourning her death and learning more about her life, I was more focused on the stories of Tante Akke than on her relationship to these children. While she was alive Tante’s nursing stories had centered around the Netherlands, where she also worked with the Dutch resistance to disguise and hide underground workers and Jewish people among TB patients in a sanitarium there. She witnessed the unsuccessful escape attempts of some of these “patients” when the sanitarium was raided by German troops during the occupation of the Netherlands.

## **Is homesickness ever part of what is factored in cause of death?**

I came to learn that this photo signaled another story of internal exile. Poverty is one of the main causes of tuberculosis: overcrowding and malnutrition exacerbate it. The medical staff on the ship that was finally sent did not allow those villagers who tested positive to the TB examination onboard to return to shore.<sup>24</sup> Until 1957, when a social worker joined the crew of the *C.D. Howe*, the Inuit were given no time to say goodbye, make arrangements for who would fill their role in the community in their absence, or to collect belongings for their journey south, and the person translating between English and Inuktitut did not accompany them to centralized sanitariums thousands of miles away from home. Many did not know where they were going, what the treatment would be, or how long they were going to stay. Relatives of some who did not return, and whose fate remained anonymous, intermittently made the journey to Hamilton to try and find out what had happened to them.

On 11 June 1995, at Hamilton's Woodland Cemetery, a granite memorial was dedicated to Inuit who died of TB during their stay at "the San," replacing the wooden stakes that had formerly marked their graves. This memorial and its dedication are markers of how 1,300 Inuit came to spend an average of 28 months in the San between 1955 and 1963. This narrative that directly affected

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<sup>24</sup> This story is recorded in Benoît Pilon's *Ce Qu'il Faut Pour Vivre (The Necessities of Life)*, a film about an Inuit hunter confined to a Quebec sanitarium during the 1950s tuberculosis epidemic, that was released in Spring 2009. Bernard Émond wrote the screenplay.

one in five Inuit continues. In 2003, Meeka Newkignak and four others from Baffin Island came to Hamilton to attend a double funeral for Meeka's grandmother Kotiajuk and Mary and Tye Pudlats' mother Angosgemayuk (Wilson 2003).

The narrative of this context of my immigrant Tante's encounter with Inuit at the San also highlights the way stories of different cultures clash. Disparate views and traditions of what brings health and illness work their way through this narrative of how the Canadian government responded to the TB epidemic among Inuit communities. In his work with Labrador Innu,<sup>25</sup> Colin Samson explores these differences between their way of life and health and argues that "the materialist philosophical foundations of medicine tend to limit attention to the cause-and-effect relationships inscribed upon the Cartesian body and the germ theory of illness" (251). If an illness can be isolated to a specific kind of organism or germ, then the body that carries it need also be isolated in order to be restored. Is homesickness ever part of what is factored in cause of death? Samson goes on:

Illness to the Innu is not simply a biological malfunction. It follows from community life. For them, the severing of a permanent link with the land, which is the flip side of their confinement to villages, has had a huge bearing on their well-being. The collective loss of autonomy occasioned by [appropriations of land and the force of Canadian governmental

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<sup>25</sup> The Innu First Nations were formerly known as the Montagnais or Naskapi peoples and they are based in twelve communities in Labrador and Quebec.



paternalism]...acts as a sort of benchmark against which they situate illness and healing. (255)

Through Samson's interpretation one hears the story of a people who experience all of the repercussions of internal exile as the foundational story that shaped their way of life was overridden by another story. As he articulates the crucial importance for the Inuu of the connection between story and land, the interrelationships that mark the health of this First Nations people became clearer.

Over the years, then, my "reading" of this photo that Tante took of the two Inuit children in the bathtub has become more layered and complex as it moved from my understanding of her work in the Netherlands, to something about the TB epidemic among Inuit communities, something about the Inuit view of what brings health and what brings illness. Besides these layers, there are gaps that continue to speak of exile, unanswered questions that need to be included in whatever reading is given to the photo. Did the children return home? Where was home? This is my land; this is not my land. There are gaps in my story even as the memorial to those Inuit who died in the San points to the gaps in the homes of those who were taken so far to be treated for TB.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> A comparative study of the circumpolar TB epidemic which reached its height in the 1950s shows that other countries set up treatment centers much closer to the homes of those peoples who suffered from this same epidemic.

## **Readinging Methodology: 1) From Where I Stand**

I bring myself fully to the interpretive process, acknowledging my full-bodied subjectivity as a gendered, temporal, socially and culturally located person with a particular array of faith commitments....bringing my interests and questions...to the text...that I might engage it fully, from where I stand.

One of the specific things that this means is that I am willing to treat the text...as a fullfledged conversation partner. (Middleton, *Liberating* 41)

In his study of the dynamics of interpretation, J. Richard Middleton articulates a postmodern approach that challenges the “nostalgia for the sort of objective certainty” that Rene Descartes proposed was possible in research: “Rather than ... thinking that there is some methodological cure for bias – we should embrace the ineradicable subjectivity of the human condition as a positive value, without which interpretation would be impossible....One can see nothing without standing in a particular place.... (*Liberating* 37). Middleton’s view that a fear of subjectivity “still exercises a profoundly unsettling influence over the sense of epistemic security among many scholars across a wide spectrum of disciplines in the contemporary academy” coincides with Isobel Findlay’s (*Liberating* 37). A scholar working in the field she calls the “Indigenous Humanities,” Findlay also highlights how

the more institutions are invested in the discourse of free inquiry and exchange, objectivity and excellence, the much less able they are to countenance or tolerate, far less promote and value, difference – the

diversity so crucial to a multicultural society and its democratic institutions” (Findlay, “Working For”).

Findlay calls for an alternative context, one where the “relationship between aboriginal and non-aboriginal peoples in Canada [is developed through].... Talking ‘people to people’ as well as ‘nation to nation,’ nourishing the ‘national community’ by ‘an ongoing act of imagination, fuelled by stories of who we are’” (George Erasmus qtd. in Findlay). It is into this context that I bring all of my bias to this question of the relationship between stories and home-making. The particular place from which I read is limited as I write from a particular interpretation of the Biblical narrative, from my location as part of a Dutch immigrant community post-World War II, and, from within the tension of immigrant/Indigenous relations, as the photo that connects my Tante’s work in the San with Inuit communities indicates.

These biases that I bring need not however muffle the voice or voices within the text in front of me. Interpretation or reading “is not a fixed, unidirectional matter,” says Middleton; rather, it is “dynamic and dialogical; texts can talk back. One’s original understandings and prejudices are often changed by encounters with the text and also by listening to other traditions of interpretation” (*Liberating* 38). Middleton emphasizes an “attentive listening for the voice of a text,” suggesting that this attention and listening is “just like listening to a person” (41). As children, my siblings and I originally “heard” my Tante through her siblings’ perspectives. While our encounters with her were always mediated

through their “reading” (home-making is also layered by domestic –but not private - discord!), when they passed away, my sister and I encountered my Tante more directly and our “understandings and prejudices” changed through this new dialogue.

Even as people talk back, as my Tante did, so does the text. My initial encounter with the text (in this case, the photo) changed from an unquestioning acceptance that these children were two of her patients in the “San.” Through my research work, these children emerged from behind the shadows of both my Tante and of Indigenous people as a “hidden presence” in white Canadian consciousness and I began to listen for and to hear their voices.

## **Reading Methodology: 2) Talking Back and Living Utterances**

Besides a reading methodology informed by Middleton’s insights, my reading in this thesis is also indebted to M. M. Bakhtin’s discussion of how language works. The land as a storied place; the stories that communities inhabit; the encounters between a newly arrived community and host communities: this multi-faceted dynamic between “stories” and “home-making” finds in the spirit of M.M. Bakhtin’s work a remarkable resonance. Bakhtin speaks of language as only being alive when it is part of dialogue, and not *just* dialogue, but what he calls heteroglossia. In his reading, the imagined worlds of fictional texts become part of a “living utterance” through both the many voices in dialogue within the text, and between the text and the innumerable voices that make up the story’s context. The story, “having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical

moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of dialogic threads woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of an utterance; it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue” (“Discourse” 276). Contemporary “home-making,” for example, has been “brushing up against” the strong presence since September 11, 2001 of “homeland security” and the architecture it has conjured up suggests fortress building.<sup>27</sup> In the face of this sense that simplistically assumes that “in here” you are protected from the enemy “out there,” Bakhtin would argue that fictional stories have the potential to take such binaries and reimagine fortress building and liberation: that they begin much closer to home, home that in the novels’ sense would include the complicated human heart. It is precisely this complexity that fictional texts can imagine as they trace how borders, inclusions and exclusions begin, how this internal dynamic shapes the way the eyes perceive another. In the conclusion of the thesis I will expand on the particular work that fictional stories do.

Part of the tension between First Nations and immigrant/settler communities has been the way a dominant culture has been (and continues to be) imposed on a particular people, creating exile in its attempt to assimilate into the project of empire-building what makes a community particular. Bakhtin draws a parallel to this imposed process in his study of language and of discourse. He

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<sup>27</sup> While Miroslav Volf notes that “the stronger the conflict, the more the rich texture of the social world disappears,” I would add that the stronger the conflict, the stronger also is the temptation to simplify and give reductionistic readings of another community’s stories, so that dialogue is sacrificed (104).

describes the oppression of an “ideologically saturated unitary” language as a “centripetal force” that, in the novel, will always attempt to subdue the resistance of the multitude of other voices: “alongside the centripetal forces the centrifugal forces carry on their uninterrupted work; alongside verbal-ideological centralization and unification, the uninterrupted processes of decentralization and disunification go forward” (“Discourse” 272). Writing (as he himself is in exile) under the “centripetal force” of the totalitarian regime of Stalin, Bakhtin explores the potential for language to always interrupt the attempt to forcefully impose a unifying “we” that silences languages that, he argues, are only ever alive in dialogue.

Bakhtin’s claim that “a unitary language [will always] operate in the midst of heteroglossia”<sup>28</sup> resonates powerfully with the argument raised by Taiaiake Alfred in *Peace, Power and Righteousness* (“Discourse” 272). Although Alfred speaks provocatively and prophetically from a First Nations perspective, he argues that there is a dominant story whose ‘unitary language’ does not just threaten peoples indigenous to Canada but presents “problems [that] plague all our societies, Native and white” (44). Alfred challenges the “false premises of [a] colonialism” that is manifested in an “acquisitive, individualistic value system,” one which not only undermines “relations between our peoples” but threatens

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<sup>28</sup> While Bakhtin’s specific meaning of this term will become an important part of the discussion later in this thesis, the dictionary defines heteroglossia as “the existence of two or more voices within a text, esp. conflicting discourses within a linguistic activity as between the narrative voice and the characters in a novel.” *Dictionary.com’s 21st Century Lexicon*. Dictionary.com, LLC. 04 May 2010. Web.

what the collective of each culture is able to contribute within a shared place (45).

Alfred acknowledges that it would be “satisfying for indigenous people to ascribe

... a greedy, dominating nature to white people” (45). However true this accusation might be, he says this is a dead end, claiming that it is more “hopeful to listen to the way traditional [Indigenous] teachings speak of the various human families”:

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They ask that we consider each [human family] to be gifted and powerful in its own way, each with something different to contribute to the achievement of peace and harmony. Far from condemning different cultures, this position challenges each one to discover its gift in itself and realize it fully, to the benefit of humanity as a whole. It is just as important for Europeans as it is for Native people to cultivate the values that promote peace and harmony. (45)

While Bakhtin speaks of the heteroglossia that will always challenge the corraling movement of unitary language, Alfred speaks of the potential for heteroglossia among human families, a chorus in which “each [has] something different to contribute.”<sup>30</sup> While Alfred asks how each culture can offer its

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<sup>29</sup> “Family” in Alfred’s context should not be interpreted to signify a narrow kinship by blood and the clear naturalized boundaries between families. He expands his term “human family” in the following sentence to include a particular culture/tradition.

<sup>30</sup> Bakhtin’s view of language that always works against the “centripetal force” of an imposed “unity,” and Alfred’s challenge that each human family discover, realize and offer its particular gift resonates with the empire-building signified in the name “Babylon” in the scope of the Biblical narrative. Babylon in this narrative is etymologically related to Babel, where one language was imposed in the building of a tower signifying the hubris of the builders. Those pressed into doing the building however, suddenly found themselves speaking many languages and this “centrifugal force” disrupted and ended that monumental drive.

particular gift for the life beyond itself, Bakhtin, in his focus on language, speaks of the multivoiced novel which always points beyond itself, questioning or responding to “discourse in the open spaces of public squares, streets, cities, and village”(“Discourse” 259). It is within this context that I will explore the many voices that imagine exile and the reorientation that is portrayed by Wiebe, Niro, Robinson and Laurence.

### **Into the Public Square**

As they trace the displacement of their characters and/or communities and ways that they begin to reorient themselves, Laurence, Niro, Wiebe and Robinson bring these voices into the public square where they contest the tendency towards unitary language that makes up the dominant story of the founding of Canada. This “unitary language” is found for example in the persistent notion that Canadian society is founded on just two “pillars,” ignoring the millennia over which Indigenous communities had developed sophisticated ways of living in this land. As each of these fictional texts joins other voices that speak to the complicated relationship between First Nations and settler cultures that share this land, their lament over specific exiles is not prescriptive but suggestive. The earliest text - Margaret Laurence’s 1974 publication of *The Diviners* - is identified with a critique of the central place given within Canada to the English canon; instead, Alan Lawson places it beside works by Chinue Achebe, V.S. Naipaul and Wole Soyinka in the “de facto canon” of a “Commonwealth post-colonial stream” (Lawson, “Introduction” xvii). Besides the shift that Lawson



signals in terms of literary canon, the lament over a national legacy that Laurence articulates in *The Diviners* joins two others, both published the year before, in 1973: one by poet Dennis Lee and the other by Métis writer Maria Campbell. In his essay “Cadence, Country, Silence: Writing in Colonial Space,” Lee pays homage to the worldview inherent in George Grant’s *Lament for a Nation* -- that being deeply human involves a “reverence for what is” which requires a response that makes humans “subject to sterner civil necessities than liberty or the pursuit of happiness” (51). Lee speaks powerfully of the danger of the growing “dream of the conquest of what is” through technology that imagines “an unlimited human freedom” that would allow humans “to force everything around us to conform to our own wills” (Lee 51). In the wake of this valorization of the individual and technology, Lee argues, all else is seen as “raw material to be manipulated and remade according to the hungers of one’s nervous system and the demands of one’s technology,” a “raw material that includes ...native peoples, other nations, outer space, one’s own body” (51). Lee’s argument that there is no strong counternarrative to this dominant story, however, did not anticipate the implicit and explicit critique that was inherent in Maria Campbell’s autobiography *Halfbreed*.

The first Métis voice to break into mainstream English Canadian publishing,<sup>31</sup> Campbell’s *Halfbreed* chronicles a “reverence for what is” as she

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<sup>31</sup> Although Pauline Johnson would not have referred to herself as Métis, and although she was widely known in Canada and in England for her public *performances* of her Mohawk and

describes the particulars of her own Métis upbringing. Campbell begins by framing her story within Canada's colonizing context, describing in detail the violent exclusions and provocations that finally led to the manufactured perception that the Métis, along with Big Bear's and Poundmaker's Cree people posed a huge threat. Against this perception, the Canadian government sent over 8,000 troops out against this assembly of 150. She goes on to record how her Cheechum (Grandmother) would not allow the young Campbell to measure her own people by white standards, how among her community harvesting was a communal affair, and how both parents taught her and her siblings to "read" their environment, implicitly developing in them a deep understanding of humans in dialogue with the ecological household. Campbell then relates how the strong memories of this way of life were almost obliterated by her contact with white culture as the conditions that kept her home intact changed with the death of her mother.

Campbell's text is the beginning of a post-World War II groundswell of Indigenous voices which invite non-Indigenous cultures to hear First Nations and Métis peoples tell their own stories, stories which playwright Tomson Highway hopes "can teach his audience something new and something terribly relevant and beautiful about that particular landscape that they too have become inhabitants of" (Highway qtd. in Moses 87). Alongside Dennis Lee they critique simplistic portrayals that try to establish a sense of Canadian unity by erasing the complex

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English identity, her influence as a mixed-race writer half a century before Campbell is receiving important critical attention.

realities (historical and cultural) that each community brings, these voices rise out of distinct collectives and include the writing of Métis scholar Emma LaRocque, Cree playwright Thomson Highway, Delaware poet (Six Nations) Daniel David Moses, and Salteaux playwright Ian Ross, to name a few. Each of these authors gives testimony that refuses “to forget the suppressed brutalities that are not just part of the nation’s past but are also ongoing elements of the structure of civility upon which the nation as an entity is founded” (Coleman 44). They point to how the past continues to affect the future and to the wounds that mark this national body.

The twenty years between Margaret Laurence’s *The Diviners* and Shelley Niro’s 1993 film *It Starts With a Whisper* (produced with Anne Groneau), are marked by painfully slow but steadily growing public awareness across Canada of the effects of the residential school system on the 100,000 Native children aged six and up who attended between 1930 and 1990, when the last school closed.<sup>32</sup> Niro is a part of what Thomson Highway calls the “second wave of Native artists, performers and writers following up and expanding on the work of such first generation painters as Ojibway/Anishnaabe Norval Morrisseau and Odawa Daphne Odjig” (Highway qtd in Moses 85).<sup>33</sup> A common response to

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<sup>32</sup> For a comprehensive study of the Indigenous Residential School system, see Chrisjohn, *The Circle Game: Shadows and Substance in the Indian Residential School Experience in Canada*.

<sup>33</sup> The Fall 2008 retrospective exhibition of Odawa Daphne Odjig’s work at the McMichael Gallery in Kleinburg Ontario moved to the National Art Gallery in January 2009. It was the first solo exhibit there by a First Nations female artist, and it came only a few years after Norval Morrisseau’s exhibit. Thomson Highway’s own journey helped to strengthen the possibilities for grounding First Nations’ stories in specific communities. Born in a tent on his parent’s trapline in December 1951, Highway grew up in the Brochet reserve in the far north-west of Manitoba,

Mohawk film maker Shelley Niro's *It Starts With a Whisper* (1993) and *Suite: INDIAN* (2005) is that she has opened a window on their own world for her First Nations audiences. This response to Niro's films could be broadened and read as a tribute to the literary and social heteroglossia that is forming a dialogue among First Nations communities in which they are not being spoken for but are many voices occupying and speaking from solid ground.

In addressing the questions of how stories contribute to the search for home for a people and how exiles write their stories in contrast to the dominant empire story to develop their own particular identity, this project will argue that solid ground mentioned above is not the "common ground" that J. Edward Chamberlin assumes is created because "we" all have stories. I will take up the differences between First Nations and immigrant/settler communities as they are portrayed in the fictional texts, differences as a sign of rich multiplicity that have, as Taiaiake Alfred says, the potential to be gifts one culture can offer another, differences that can only become gifts through a long and difficult process that includes learning to listen in a way that is open to being changed by what one hears.

At the same time, this project hopes to highlight the larger story that no one culture can claim as its own territory. This larger story is manifested in the

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and attended residential school in The Pas (Moses 85). While he was training as a classical pianist at the University of Western Ontario, Highway was "drawn particularly to the work of Canadian playwright" James Reaney (Moses 86).<sup>33</sup> Reaney's trilogy on the Irish immigrant family the Donnellys, set just north of London, Ontario, allowed Tomson Highway to later imagine locating *The Rez Sisters* on a fictional reserve on Manitoulin Island.

life of the land, in which humans are but a small part (see Chapter One); it is manifested in the deep need to belong as a beloved people (Chapter Two). And, this larger story is manifested in the humility that says “in understanding a little, we are only ever entering a larger river” (Aldred, see Chapter Three). Lament records loss, but it holds within it a strong sense of what it mourns; it is also a song, the voice of someone who is located: an embodied voice that refuses a particular silence. As such, it is a sign of hope in the difficult dialogue in which these fictional texts take part.

## **Chapter One: Finding Oneself At Home in this Household, this Story-Soaked Place**

### **Introduction**

Many voices express what it means to be in place or out of place; some praise “upward” mobility and measure this mobility as a sign of success, which they define in financial terms. Some praise mobility as freedom to be *away*. Implying that the longing for home is a nostalgic construct and saying uncategorically that “you can never go home again” underlies literary criticism that “values exile, diaspora and migration for the promise that they hold out of critical detachment and the possibilities of self-invention” (ten Kortenaar 3). Is there a relationship between this impulse to value exile, critical detachment and self-invention and a touristic nomadism that reinvents the notion of *terra nullius* through the ephemeral but nevertheless imperial figure of the “global citizen”? Bouma-Prediger and Walsh describe a man named Paul, a “postmodern nomad” who

has no sense of place, he merely roams from one place to another. Or, more precisely, he wanders from no place to no place, since no particular place takes on sufficient significance to distinguish it from any other. No specific

place is *invested with enough story-soaked meaning* to make it a place to which one would want or need to return. (45 emphasis added)

What gives a place “story-soaked meaning”? What does being a global citizen and self-invention have to do with living in story-soaked places that are anything but empty spaces, where one cannot choose but inherit what has been done there? Sara Ahmed’s “Home and Away” examines the valorization of a “nomadic or migratory” consciousness, noting that in this framework home is implicitly characterized as a place of stasis, privilege and inoculation (81).

In its focus on how land is portrayed in stories about home-making away from home, this chapter takes up Ahmed’s challenge of the caricature of home as a “pure, fixed space ... uncontaminated by movement” (89). Home-making is something that does happen in a place that is indeed “fixed” in the sense that there are always already many voices in conversation here. Each place is alive with the dynamic relationships that define its particular ecological household, relationships that include humans, either those who have traveled through or those whose knowledge of this place is based on their long-standing relationships here. In the context of Indigenous-settler relations in Canada, J. Edward Chamberlin offers a clear-eyed critique of the very categories that have often been used to signify a rooted “settler” and a ‘wandering’ “nomad”: “Think about it. Aborigines who know the names of every plant and the location of all the water holes, as perpetual nomads....we call Them wanderers? Europeans in a place ten thousand miles

from home, as settlers? ....It's hard to imagine a more cockeyed set of categories" (30).

The prevalence of these kinds of myths persist alongside the perception that this place was *terra nullius*, an empty land, and they not only reveal the Eurocentricity of the stories of early modern explorers who 'discovered' other lands; these illusions also live on in a way of life that sets humans squarely at the center of life on earth. This mindset is manifested in the old chestnut: "if a tree falls to the ground and no one is there to hear it fall, will it make a sound?": a question that assumes this "one" is a human creature, and that this place where the tree falls only has integrity and meaning through human presence. It assumes that because a human cannot hear it the tree does not speak. In a welcome alternative to this view of the earth, Okanagan author, educator, artist, and activist Jeanette Armstrong develops one Indigenous perspective of the "land speaking":

The language spoken by the land, which is interpreted by the Okanagan into words, carries parts of its ongoing reality. The land as language surrounds us completely, just like the physical reality of it surrounds us. Within that vast speaking, both externally and internally, we as human beings are an inextricable part – though a minute part – of the land language" (178).

The tree does speak. This tree that has fallen has been part of the dialogue of this particular place for perhaps hundreds of years. Its branches have swayed and its leaves have rustled in response to the wind blowing there. Birds have responded to its presence by nesting and singing among its branches; the porcupine has found



a high refuge up its trunk. The tree has inhaled carbon monoxide and exhaled oxygen. Its rings will tell of seasons of drought, of changing weather patterns. The fall of the tree only signals a change in the continuing dialogue, and the dynamic of its relationship to this place never ceases. It will become the habitat of other creatures as it lies on the forest floor, and finally, a part of the rich humus as it slowly decomposes, as it returns back to the living earth, a part of creation's seasoned and eloquent song. Besides the eloquence of these relations Jace Weaver points to how "Native American storytelling"<sup>34</sup> is another voice in these relations and quotes Louis Owens that this storytelling "is a construction of reality that begins always with the land" ("Splitting" 64). Weaver describes how land is understood not only in terms of territory but of "numinous landscapes that are central to [Indigenous people's] faith and identity...populated by their relations, ancestors, animals, and beings both physical and mythological" ("Splitting" 64).

### **The Earth speaks as home-making agent, a Place as household, and as a Place that is soaked with Stories**

The first part of this chapter is grounded on the assumption that this creation is an active home-making agent, and follows the "first-wave" of ecocriticism in its focus on "place-attachment" by examining how Margaret Laurence, Eden Robinson and Rudy Wiebe portray the agency of the environment,

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<sup>34</sup> When Indigenous literary critics are not nation-specific in identifying a people's literature, they identify literatures as belonging to "First Nations" (Canada) and "Native American" (United States).

“unpacking,” as Terry Gifford writes, “the mediations of art” (16).<sup>35</sup> How do they portray the more-than-human life of a place? In what ways does the life of the land work its way into their storytelling? Is this life portrayed as part of a particular place’s “story-soaked meaning”?

Besides this examination of whether earth is portrayed as an agent of home-making, this chapter follows Gifford’s subsequent claim that human “awareness...needs to work both ways, towards nature and towards culture’s making of place,” and that “understanding of place-making as a culturally inflected process” is equally important. In its focus on portrayals of place in the context of home-making away from home, this chapter does not wish to set up a binary between the earth’s many voices and humankind’s voices. Humans are a part of creation and often a particular exile is the consequence of a *competition* between these voices; when humans do not listen to the land speak the consequence is often that humans poison its life or, only ever take from it. Turning a place upside down also has to do with detachments. Julie Cruikshank traces how 18<sup>th</sup> century visitors to the St. Elias Mountains area in northwest Alaska/British Columbia “were heartened by the possibility that their

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<sup>35</sup> In his meditations on “space” European theorist Henri Lefebvre *begins* with the mediations of art, and I wonder if Indigenous and non-Native notions of place that begin in the non-human physical world resist and/or balance Lefebvre’s anthropocentric starting point. Lefebvre’s use and emphasis on the word “space” is grounded in human mediations, and his analysis is astute as he shows how representations through art become part of the complex process that is the experience of space, for example when “in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> century perspective was introduced in the Sienese School (Lefebvre 210). When he traces the history of a specific place in time however, Lefebvre begins with the human voice instead of how a place reveals its own history, for example, through fossils. It is at this point that this chapter’s perspective departs from poststructural ideas of place.

enlightenment categories and scientific instruments might help them to pry nature from culture” and that this neat separation was completely foreign to the way local Tlingit and Athapaskan peoples understood their relationship to the nonhuman world (10). These peoples portrayed the glaciers as

intensely *social* spaces where human behaviour, especially casual hubris or arrogance, can trigger dramatic and unpleasant consequences in the physical world. In other words, Tlingit and Athapaskan oral traditions explore the connections between nature and culture as carefully as early exploration projects tried to disentangle them. (11)

The primordial stories in the book of Genesis also speak of an earth that responds to human hubris. It serves as a witness, for example, in the story of how Cain murdered his brother Abel. Abel’s spilled blood, we are told, cries out from the ground, and in response, the Creator visits Cain with the question “where is your brother”? (Genesis 4:9). The ground is first polluted not by poisonous waste but by Cain’s murder, by Abel’s spilled blood in a narrative in which life on earth depends on belonging animated by hearing and by response.

As he reflects on its developments, Terry Gifford points out that while ecocriticism begins “with fictions...of environmental situatedness,” there is also the reality of the dialogue between “nature and ...[a] culture’s making of place,” (81). Gifford quotes Lawrence Buell to highlight the “mutuality” that exists between nature and culture rather than the way they are often viewed “as separate domains” (81). In the second part of this chapter I will ask how fictionalized

characters and communities respond to this place that is around them. When characters come to a place new to them, will they assume that this place speaks or will they assume this is “empty land”? How does the text portray the consequences of these approaches?

The final section of the chapter combines ecocritical and postcolonial approaches to the question of how one finds oneself at home in a particular place, asking how “the stubborn particulars of voice” – including the voice of each fictional text – pay homage to the relationships that are grounded in particular places (Cruikshank 17). What is the relationship between place and the stories that have shaped it over time? The stories that “soak” a place include the particular ways of life of its inhabitants as well as “what really happened” in this place over time. How do the people living here now respond to what has happened here in the past? The voices that are raised in these stories resist what Cruikshank describes as a “too globalizing and too ahistorical... postcolonial metanarrative” that becomes a kind of template suggesting colonialism was exercised in the same way everywhere and that response to it by Indigenous peoples could be described as having “predictable outcomes” (9).

### **The “stubborn particulars of voice” in two stories of displacement**

The displacement of the Spokane peoples into reserves, for example, is very different from the displacement of the Haudenosaunee from the Mohawk River Valley area to the Grand River. As he describes the networks of trade that had been developed over many generations, Spokane fiction writer and poet

Sherman Alexie points out that for Indigenous North and South Americans “to be in one place is a recent invention” (Alexie 2009). He points to the irony “that reserve life has become such a dominant mode of identity [and] is a way of people accepting the definition of [those] who wanted Indians to disappear ... [since] reserves were created as rural death camps for Indians” (Alexie 2009). How the Six Nations came to inhabit their land in Ontario, to name one example, does not fit a homogeneous colonial narrative, nor does it fit Alexie’s description of reserves as rural death camps.

In 1784 the British offered six miles on either side of the Grand River, from its source to where it empties into Lake Erie, to the Iroquois Confederacy, who moved from the Mohawk River Valley area to live there in a nation-to-nation relationship. However, this land was persistently whittled away and the breaking of the relationship of allies was most dramatic in a take-over on October 1924 when “the oldest continuously running democratic government in the world... was closed at gunpoint” (Coleman “Imposing” 10). A 2006 news release noted that “since 1974, [of the] 29 claims... filed by Six Nations, only one...has been fully resolved, in 1980” (“Media Release”). Although in this chapter I do not focus on Shelley Niro’s work, this context is important in terms of this thesis, which is written in a place neighbouring Haudenosaunee territory. Niro also layers this territory with the territory of the Mohawk River Valley as the setting of the story of how consolation comes to the main character in her latest feature film: *Kissed by Lightning* (2009). Mavis Dogblood, a Mohawk artist from the Grand River

area, travels through Mohawk River and Valley in what is now upper state New York, on her way to deliver her paintings for an art exhibit in New York City. Her paintings portray a foundational Haudenosaunee story: of how in this very place through which she is moving the relationship between Hiawatha and the Peacemaker developed hundreds of years before. The consolation the Peacemaker was able to give Hiawatha formed the foundation of the alliance between the five warring nations who had occupied this territory, and Niro's main character Mavis also finds consolation as she makes this journey through this territory. These legacies of being rooted and uprooted are the contexts within which Rudy Wiebe, Eden Robinson and Margaret Laurence write their characters' movement within the land. What does it mean to be landed, to be here to stay, to have staying power? This chapter suggests it begins through a careful listening.

### **The Land Speaks As Hospitable Household**

Our home planet is our common household: all of us, human and nonhuman alike, share the same house.... This understanding...is enriched when we attend to earth as *oikos*. The Greek word *oikos* (eco-) means house or household, thus "ecology" is the *logos* of the *oikos*, that is, the study of the household, and "economics" is the *nomos* of the *oikos*, the law or the rules of the household....Ecology is the study of individuals and populations, communities and habitats, life systems and dynamics of the household, and *of what is required for living well*. Economics is the study of how to

respectfully care for ... the earth so that the various requirements of the household are met and sustained, *so that the household is hospitable for all its inhabitants*. Ecology is the knowledge necessary for good home economics. (Bouma-Prediger et al. 185-186 emphases added)

I bring David Abrams into dialogue with the above claims since when one thinks of the “earth as household,” it is tempting to envision the above-mentioned tree slowly decomposing in a forest – a setting that does not show much of human traces. Abrams challenges these strict separations between the “wilderness” as a place people may go to vacation and the “urban” centers where humans seemingly are the ones making up the “rules of the household.” Cutting through this pervasive binary, Abram notes that “New York City remains, first and foremost, an island settlement in the Hudson River estuary, subject to [its] coastal weather” (273). Implicitly pointing to the intimate connection between economy and ecology that is persistently ignored by Wall Street, Abrams continues that “for all the international commerce that goes on within its glassy walls, Manhattan could not exist without its grounding amid the waters with [the Hudson River estuary’s] tidal surges” (273).

This chapter introduces one of the themes of this thesis: that there is a larger story humans are invited to find themselves at home in. A part of that larger story is the creation that we are born into, a household that humans do not initiate. Seeds swell and break open with green shoots in response to rain, to the sun’s warmth, to a season of that particular locale. All of this call and response

goes on while humans sleep. At birth we enter the life of a household larger than that of the specific clan to which we belong. Humankind responds to and from this birthplace, our “home planet,” set among the vast expanse of galaxies.

An ecological household of interdependent relationships both spans the globe and traces the topography in each place, relationships that, independent of humans, are as strong and persistent as the ubiquitous dandelion that manages to break through the pavement of roads no longer in use, as resilient as the bacteria that, when activated, is able to digest and redeem highly toxic soil.<sup>36</sup> For all of this resilience, earth can be described as an environment that provides “a delicate, and probably exceedingly rare, cradle for complex life” (“Privileged”). “Placeness” is both local in terms of a region, and global in terms of being transhemispheric. The skin that enfolds the planet is a living and great integrative sphere, the envelope through which energy is transferred and water is distilled, according to environmental scientist Calvin DeWitt (“Sifting”). One can see the earth breathe, he says, by monitoring carbon dioxide levels. Inside that membrane, there are air currents that move and swirl across landmasses and seas. The oceans, rivers, lakes, and streams that cover so much of the earth matter-of-factly surge, flow and babble across all of the boundaries set by humans. According to the seasons the Creator sets for them, whales navigate around the world through the songs they

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<sup>36</sup> For a very elementary introduction on bioremediation, see <http://www.thenakedscientists.com/HTML/content/interviews/interview/541/>.



send out, speech that travels hundreds of miles,<sup>37</sup> even as birds migrate along air currents from one hemisphere to another. Each kind moves according to its own particular ways, and always finds its way back to the places where it needs to be according to the particular season of its life on earth.

The intricate balance that is non-human life on earth is made precarious when humans move into the neighbourhood, because the continuing welfare of the place becomes dependent on human attentiveness and respect. Both Calvin DeWitt and David Abrams insist that respect is the ground that allows attentive listening to the myriad of particular relationships that make up each locale's specific household. DeWitt tells how a desert iguana interacts with its environment to survive, regulating its temperature to keep cool in 130 F degree conditions, and he claims this interaction is a relatively simple one compared to a tree in the rain forest which could be home to 22,000 species ("Sifting). Abrams describes how in Nepal Sherpas watch the "wingeds" who "carry the immediate knowledge of what is unfolding on the far side of the next ridge" (23). These birds, closely attended, can reveal "climatic changes in the offing, as well as ...subtle shifts in the flow and density of air currents in one's own valley" (23).

In *A Discovery of Strangers* Rudy Wiebe begins with the many voices of the more than human world that together portray the integrity of the territory where in 1821 John Franklin's first overland expedition meets the Tetsot'ine people, who have a longstanding place in this particular ecological household. The

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<sup>37</sup>This migration and navigation is eloquently described in "Ocean Mind" Part I. CBC Radio "Ideas." [http://podcast.cbc.ca/mp3/ideas\\_20090105\\_10168.mp3](http://podcast.cbc.ca/mp3/ideas_20090105_10168.mp3)

first discovery is not human centered in Wiebe's portrayal of and play on "discoveries." In a reversal of proud assumptions that those arriving from far away are bringing value to a place through some bestowal of their human presence, Wiebe gives the first "word" in *Strangers* to the vast, moving, and unfathomable life of this land. The opening sentence evokes a sense of this place that is beyond all telling: "the land is so long, and the people traveling in it so few, the curious animals barely notice them from one lifetime to the next" (1). Here is a vastness imagined not only in terms of space but of the animals' lifetime. Implicitly anticipating the approach of the English, Wiebe lays the groundwork of the story: this land is not empty, large as it is. Nor is it fixed: although he describes its winter as "that clenched fist of the long darkness," this darkness is alive with the creatures who inhabit it. Despite the severity of the cold, they move within "that clenched fist....their powerful feathered, furred bodies as light as flecks of ice sifting over snow, as light and quick as breathing" (2). "The dark weight of midwinter" is nevertheless alive and is ever changing as one season moves towards the other, a change that includes the animals bearing young, their migrations, and their hunting one another (2). The first "discovery of strangers" is made by the caribou who "begin to hear strange noises" and who draw near to discover "these were strangers...blatantly loud [as they] made the trees in one place scream and smash that way" (1-2). Narrated from the caribou's perspective, these travelers are loud and dangerous to the non-human life that, unlike the

caribou, cannot move around this blundering: the trees are at these strange-making humans' mercy.

In *Monkey Beach*, Eden Robinson also portrays a non-human world beyond human control. Just as the force of the long winter makes survival precarious in *Strangers*, in Robinson's story the ocean storms and the seals are dangerous. Narrator Lisamarie's beloved Uncle Mick drowns when he is thrown overboard in a storm and is attacked by seals, and, a distant relative's boat disappears during another storm. Although humans die violently at the "hands" of both human and non-human forces, Robinson implicitly responds to the question of what speaks solace into an alienating human context by pointing to the traditional Haisla emphasis on *where* Lisamarie finds herself. The life of the land provides grounding for her. In the face of all the violence that dislocates Lisamarie the land, as described by her uncle and grandmother Ma-ma-oo., offers nourishment. This grounding includes awe and wonder that surfaces as they introduce her to the Haisla story of the Kitamaat region, and to the wisdom gained through the Haisla's generations-old relationship to this particular place on earth. Through Uncle Mick and Ma-ma-oo, Lisamarie is introduced to the bright web that makes up this relationship, and that orients her amidst the carnage she experiences all around her.

The rhythms of the seasons are highlighted in Robinson's brief description of this important apprenticeship. Since "winter in Kitamaat meant a whole season of flaccid, expensive vegetables from town," the *q°alh'm* that Mick and Lisamarie pick in the short spring season is portrayed as an exquisite gift (73). Robinson's

description evokes the delight the *q°alh'm* brings: under their peel “the shoots were translucent green, had a light crunch and a taste close to fresh snow peas” (73). Likewise Robinson’s narrator takes pleasure in describing the salmonberries Mick and Lisamarie pick for Ma-ma-oo:

Hand-high salmonberry shoots unfolded from tight fronds. Serrated, raspberry-like leaves unfurled as the shoots became stalks, then bushes. Hard, nubby buds opened into five-petaled hot-pink flowers....the petals formed a deep cup with a fuzzy yellow centre where the heavy, zingy nectar sparkled. As the petals fell, salmonberries poked through. They started off green and hard....[then] plumped up and softened with the rain and ripened in the sun, suffusing jewel-bright red, orange or yellow, glowing against the green of the bush. (76-77)

The sensuous pleasures that their surroundings offer include the oolichan grease which makes the salmonberry stew Ma-ma-oo cooks up “sinfully rich, as thick as cheesecake” (78). Robinson’s descriptions of the fruit of their specific place evokes the sense of gratitude and appreciation that is elicited though the salmonberry harvest. This gratitude extends to the making of the oolichan grease for which the Haisla of Kitamaat were famous up and down the coast.

Eden Robinson’s portrayal of the traditional relationship between the community and the land around Kitamaat suggests that the land does speak and that Lisamarie’s grandmother knows how to listen. Ma-ma-oo points out “the canoe shape in the mountain across the channel” to Lisamarie, describes the play

between the sun, this shape and the seasonal gathering of humans and animals in anticipation of the migrating oolichan:

when the sun touched the bow [of the canoe shape], you knew the oolichans would be here. Bears woke up and eagles gathered with seagulls and crows and ravens, waiting anxiously at the rivers. Seals bobbed hopefully in the water and killer whales followed the seals. The people who still made grease started building wooden fermenting boxes (88-89)....Only the most experienced grease makers [would] decide when the oolichans are ripe enough to be transformed into grease. (86)

The season (time) is inseparable from the particular geography (place) and these factors are part of the chorus of voices in this scene: all responding to the potential arrival of the oolichan, in praise of the “delicate equilibrium” that is being maintained here. Robinson’s careful description of how the salmonberries grow in spring, how all manner of creatures wait for the oolichan, and how its grease is made corroborates Armstrong’s observation that “all indigenous peoples’ languages are generated by a precise geography and arise from it” (178).

Robinson’s portrayal of this relationship as one that orients Lisamarie underlines the importance for home-making of listening. Ella Soper-Jones writes that “the evidence that linguistic diversity promotes biodiversity continues to mount” as she points to “Native environmentalism” that highlights the importance of “biolinguistic diversity.... positioning ecological restoration and cultural survival as inseparable concerns for Indigenous communities” (16). In *Monkey Beach* the

grounding that Lisamarie receives reflects an intimate knowledge of the seasons and the dialogue between human and nonhuman communities in this particular place. Consequently, Robinson's portrayal of the industrial pollution that ends the common practice of making and of trading this grease also jeopardizes speech, in this novel where silence and secrecy are signs of an implosive violence. Here too, an eloquent dialogue has been muffled, one that included the call and response in this place that began with the arrival of the oolichan and included the conversation between the Village and those coastal communities with whom they traded the grease.

In contrast to all that jeopardizes speech in the context of *Monkey Beach*, Eden Robinson suggests that the main characters' identity is bound up in the land they find themselves in, through enchantment that occurs when a resonance is discovered here.<sup>38</sup>

The experience of grace .... falls as far outside the pale of causally intelligible orders as atrocity. It just *is* lyric experience – a moment when the scales fall from our eyes, ears, every sense, and we know the world as a resonant whole

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<sup>38</sup> Enchantment should be distinguished from magic in the following section on Robinson's text. While Robinson does use the term "magic" and "magical," the way this is expressed in the text speaks more of enchantment than magic. Magic, the use of ritual "to manipulate the natural world," suggests some kind of "extra" power humans use over the more than human world, manipulation that becomes another form of human coercion. (*OED* 1. a.) Enchantment's action, on the other hand, can be associated with "alluring...charm" so that in the context of this chapter, one is being moved by, in a sense, wooed by, the nonhuman world (*OED* 1. b.). This is the sense that David Abrams uses as he speaks of a "spontaneous and quietly growing movement" of "persons who have fallen in love *outward* with the world around them" and who seek to "meet the generosity of the land with a kind of wild faithfulness" (271 emphasis added).

(Zwicky, “Lyric,” 99-100).

Eden Robinson’s Lisamarie describes this kind of enchantment, this moment of ‘knowing the world as a resonant whole’ as she recalls an experience ... with her brother Jimmy, one that takes him beyond his own failures. Through disciplined practice, Jimmy had been on his way to becoming an Olympic level swimmer. He was completely acquainted with water, but only within the framework of competitive athletics: counting seconds, counting degrees of form in the chlorinated swimming pool water. When he is injured he is forced to withdraw from the race. When he no longer counts in competitive ways, Jimmy becomes open to being surprised by the life of another kind of water: the unmanageable sea waters of Douglas Channel. As he and Lisamarie are leaving the place called Monkey Beach a pod of “sleek black bodies,” --orca whales -- come alongside their boat and Jimmy dives in to watch them underwater. Later, when he is lost at sea and she is searching for Jimmy, Lisamarie “holds him *there* in [her] memory, smiling, excited, telling [her] how they moved ... and how the water looked so much more magical *when they were swimming in it*” (*Monkey Beach* 353-354, emphasis added). Through this encounter the “scales fall from” his eyes; the relationship between Jimmy the swimmer in love with water and the life of the water itself gains an entirely new resonance. While the above section cites occasions where both Eden Robinson and Rudy Wiebe portray an earth that speaks, earth as a world *beyond* humans, the following section examines portrayals in which the earth asks for a response from humans creatures.

## On Finding or Making Oneself at Home

To the extent that we are part of the ecology of what-is, our thinking displays...the fit of response and co-response. Coming to experience the fit of human thought to the world is a way of finding ourselves at home.

(Zwicky, *Wisdom* 27)

And there is a distinction between finding oneself at home and trying to make oneself at home. This corresponds to a difference in styles of thinking as well. To the extent that one must try to make oneself at home in the world, to that extent one is not part of the ecology of what-is.

(Zwicky, *Wisdom* 28)

Jan Zwicky's "distinction between *finding* oneself at home, and, *making* oneself at home" will act as a framework for the question of how humans interact with a place that is always already home. While this question will address the specific context within the story of Wiebe's *Strangers*, it will also include the nonfiction context of Robinson's *Monkey Beach* and the legacy left by the construction of the Alcan Aluminum plant in Kitamaat. This legacy is a familiar one in the broader region of Indigenous coastal towns, and my discussion of finding and making oneself at home will include brief reference to the Nuxalk nation around Bella Coola.

According to Zwicky, finding oneself at home in a specific place assumes creation is the household humans are invited to become a part of through attentive listening and response. Ecologist and philosopher David Abrams regrets that "we



have forgotten the poise that comes from living in storied relation and reciprocity with the myriad things, the myriad *beings*, that ... surround us" (270). Finding oneself at home is not a passive role, but one that takes a lifetime of cultivated attentiveness; in fact, Jeanette Armstrong cautions "the land is constantly communicating. Not to learn its language is to die" (176).

The radical personal displacements that Robinson portrays in *Monkey Beach* are mirrored in the circumstances that polluted and displaced coastal and inland nonhuman as well as the Haisla, Nuxalk and Cheslatta T'en communities. Alcan Aluminum's massive alteration to the land and to the peoples is a manifestation of what Zwicky means by "making" as opposed to "finding" oneself at home, a making based on an economics that was deaf to the "constantly communicating life" that had been developed in this region's particular ecological household over time.

Eden Robinson's references to the pollution of the waters in the area of Kitamaat are brief. When in the 1950s Alcan Aluminum came and built its plant along with a "city of the future for its workers" near their village of Kitamaat "tucked in between the mountains and the ocean," the resulting industrial pollution was just one of the things that wrought havoc in the sophisticated relationships that had developed among the Haisla whose custom and culture were and are tied closely to fishing (*MB* 5), particularly of oolichan, and to the making of oolichan grease (*MB* 85-87).

Alcan Aluminum's Kemano/Kitimaat project is rooted in a discourse of human mastery over nature (see Chapter Three). Power required to drive the aluminum smelter at Kitimaat was transmitted from miles away, from what was hailed as a "marvel of the time": the Kenney Dam project (Wynn xii). Built by Alcan, the dam reversed the flow of the Nechako River, flooding the canyon into a reservoir and displacing the Cheslatta T'en people from their way of life there. The effects of this displacement did not come to public attention for 40 years, when in 1992 the details of *how* the power project proceeded shocked commissioners of the Canadian government's *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* (Wynn xiii, endnote 1).<sup>39</sup> The local Cheslatta T'en people were:

treated as an afterthought, with completely inadequate regard for their rights. The government initiated the surrender negotiations just as the dam *was completed* and flooding *was about to begin*. *The flooding began before the surrender*. The families were told to start moving without assistance the day after the surrender was signed. Because of the spring thaw, they had to leave most of their belongings behind. The homes and many belongings of the Cheslatta were destroyed before most families could move their effects to the new location. There was no housing or land provided for families or livestock at Grassy Plains (50 kilometers north, where they were relocated) for the entire summer. When land was finally purchased for the Cheslatta, moneys were

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<sup>39</sup> *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* (1996), Vol. I, part II, section ii.3.4, "The Cheslatta T'en and the Kemano Hydro Project," available at [http://www.aainc-inac.gc.ca/ch/rcap/sg/sg40\\_e.html#118](http://www.aainc-inac.gc.ca/ch/rcap/sg/sg40_e.html#118) as cited in Carlson 260n7.

taken from individual compensation allotments to pay for it – contrary to the Cheslatta understanding of the surrender agreement. The new lands were not established as reserve lands, and the rights the Cheslatta had enjoyed as a result of living on reserves were lost for many years. Graveyards above the planned flood level were washed away” (Carlson xiii).

These then are the brief details of a discourse of mastery, details that provide a context for Eden Robinson’s *Monkey Beach*. In *Ecological Thinking* Lorraine Code describes how “diversity is suppressed” when “man assumes mastery over all he surveys,” especially when this surveying “substitutes for engaged participation” (20). While Code is able to describe this mastery with intellectual acuity, Robinson brings the violence of this mastery over human and nonhuman communities home in her novel. The pollution of the rivers, the continuing restrictions on First Nations fishing in the area and the intimidation by the logging industry are all implicitly sanctioned by government. Robinson’s story of how corruption seeps through the boundaries that mark the integrity of Lisamarie’s relationships provides a strong parallel to this context of the diminishment of First Nations’ ways of life through the coercion of industry. This legacy of mastery, of one culture lording it over another is ongoing, but continues in other villages along the coast near Kitamaat. The struggle is ongoing to keep and to garner respect for this centuries-old identification of the coastal First People with a culture of fishing.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> A news report in the *Vancouver Sun* of 23 March 2010 describes how the alliance of Coastal First Nations in British Columbia is currently opposing a proposed 1,170 km pipeline to transport oil from the Alberta tar sands across “over 1,000 streams and rivers” to a Kitamaat oil

Approximately two hundred kilometers south of Kitamaat the Nuxalk people form a community around Bella Coola, and in *Wasase: Indigenous Pathways of Action and Freedom*, Taiaiike Alfred records an interview with Sximina, one of the leaders in this community. Sximina persistently calls her people back into the household that is their traditional relationship with this area that they have inhabited for hundreds of years:

part of what I am trying to teach people about being Nuxalk is this: Do you like fish? Do you like to smoke fish and eat it? What about the oolichans and the oolichan grease? What about the deer and the moose? Do you like all that? If you do, you're Nuxalk. That's part of you, and it's part of living here. (qtd. in Alfred 192)

Sximina invites her people to find themselves at home once again, a homecoming in the face of pervasive and fierce opposition. This opposition includes federal government prohibitions on fishing, as well as the blatant favour that the government shows the logging industry, allowing it to override the peoples' spiritual life and culture. The opposition also includes the powerful lure of the lie that financial success will answer the peoples' spiritual needs. After the Nuxalk failed to save traditionally sacred land from clear-cutting, the logging company Interfor, in a cynical and criminal show of their power "moved all the white loggers away and told all the

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terminal where it will be "loaded in oil tankers heading to California and Asia" ([www.vancouver.sun.com](http://www.vancouver.sun.com) Accessed 13 April 2010. Web. See also [coastalfirstnations.ca](http://coastalfirstnations.ca)). The concerns expressed by the alliance include the risk to their way of life of inland and ocean oil spills, industry and governments lack of will to pursue alternative, more sustainable sources of energy, the environmental degradation of the current tar sands project, including the rare cancers that First Nations close to the area of the tar sands project are experiencing.

Nuxalk loggers to go out there....: ‘If you don’t log this area you’re not going to get any more work.’ This is what happened” (Sximina qtd. in Alfred 195). When speaking of the Nuxalk identity, Sximina draws on Nuxalk tradition as well as on the Bible which she reads “all the time” (Alfred 191). Sximina’s quest to seek the spiritual good of her people is influenced by this reading as well as by the Nuxalk tradition of the sacred so that, as she says, “what I’ve come to realize is that we Nuxalk people are no different than anyone else who has ever been put on this earth. But, we have been put on earth in this place, and this place is our Holy Land” (Alfred 191). And it is here that she engages her holy practice of teaching younger generations how to preserve the food that they harvest in the area, a preservation that had been passed down from one generation to another.

### **The Stranger of “Decided Ignorance” in *Discovery***

While Sximina works to restore her people’s sense of being “put on earth in this place,” a sense of being at-home in a particular ecological household that also helps orient Eden Robinson’s narrator Lisamarie, Rudy Wiebe explores the exile that comes through a people bent on “making” themselves at home. This “making” in his portrayal is imposed when Franklin’s English expedition assumes that the life of this land will conform to the way they shaped their relations to the land of England. Their goal to map the Arctic coast is based on a schedule set according to the English climate and conditions. They approach the Tetsot’ine people presuming that one place can be exchanged for another, and that the way

they measure, calculate and map land is universal, transcending the actual relationships that develop over time in a particular place.

... Astonished by the blind ambition of the expedition's goal to push north overland through seasons during which traveling will be a disaster, Keskarrah, an elder of the Tetsot'ine, names John Franklin the "Thick English" (13). However, the English are intent on "making" themselves at home by assuming that they can know a land through the measurements they have constructed: the maps they have drawn back in England, their "numbers on squared paper" (14). Ironically, for all their measuring, before their push north they "had not yet discovered [this particular land] to be twenty-six times the size of England" and instead identify anything that is not familiar to them, any strangeness, as a sign that those living here are disorderly (14). Keskarrah's wife, another elder aptly named Birdseye, discerns this attempt of the English to superimpose their imported notions onto the actual life of the land. She dreams that of all the burdens that the expedition must drag across the vast land as they push north, the heaviest is their presumption and the preponderance of their "decided" ignorance:

Before [their] feet felt this grain of land, they had decided it was empty; they have now been awarded that gift of emptiness to walk upon. Before they had looked through this air, these heads had decided it must be cold, so now cold fondles them with tender constancy. They will be much weaker...for the desolation of their decided ignorance clings to them as they ponderously move, an immense weight that, they may eventually realize, is heavier than anything

else they carry.... They will hear its relentless promise even after they have left everything else lying beside the imprints of their passing. It will say to them: ‘I am your most faithful ignorance. I will go with you and be your guide, in your most need to go by your side.’ (154-155)

Although the English insist that the Tetsot'ine people *must* help them in their quest, they put no trust in the map that Keskarrah draws for them early on. This “decided” ignorance is personified as an intimate and faithful companion on their journey, this “I am with you,” a deadly presence that has the power to disorient and estrange them.

Their ignorance does not only have consequences for themselves but it registers in the cavalier attitude that sets the English above the life of the land and that leads to violence against all the intricate relations that spell survival in this severe climate.

The fire that they set in order to “signal” the Tetsot'ine from a distance becomes uncontrollable and brings chaos to the delicate equilibriums here that support life. In this scene, while the Tetsot'ine mourn the death by drowning of two of their relations, the English find the forest that Keskarrah had told them was a ways off, and they begin to stake out what they will call “Fort Enterprise.” When the distant smoke from the fire that the Tetsot'ine have built turns from black to white, an interpreter tells them that the Tetsot'ine have found the bodies of their relations. Franklin decides to send three men across a river to set a fire to signal a reply: that they will be sending a crew over to where the Tetsot'ine are camped. In response to Robert Hood's question about what the fire signal might mean to him, Franklin generalizes blithely that “Bigfoot (the Tetsot'ine leader) understands smoke” (68). While this fire

turns into a disaster when the wind shifts and in the night “the entire ridge south of the river was burning like an immense, long city,” George Back reassures the rest of the expedition that “there’s no problem, *there’s no one there*, it must consume itself, it has nowhere to go” (69). For three days the fire rages and when finally a rainfall stops it Hood writes in his diary that the “magnificent green...had been metamorphosed into a hideous waste” (69).

The English’s ignorance signified in this fire consumes the land, and when Richardson blithely mentions that one of the trees they are chopping down to construct the fort “has been growing here for 306 years,” Wiebe suggests that the destruction of the fire works on many levels, that this forest has been one of the voices in this household for countless generations and its absence will affect many generations to come (69). Dr. Richardson then expresses gratitude that the fire burns on the other side of the river from “our trees.” The English sense of mastery allows them to assume that land can be easily separated into “our trees” and “other trees” and that “there’s no one there” in the burning forest, as if humans are the only members of this Arctic household. Later Keskarrah wryly remarks that “If a Person [an Indigenous person] isn’t with them as they live and travel, they see nothing until it burns up in front of them” (78).

In contrast to the ruination that results in a people “making” themselves at home, Rudy Wiebe pays homage to the perspective that Choctaw and Cherokee novelist and scholar Louis Owens attributes to “literature by Native American authors” who “seek the recovery of eternal and immutable elements represented by a



spiritual tradition that ...places humanity within a carefully, cyclically ordered cosmos and gives humankind irreducible responsibility for the maintenance of that delicate equilibrium” (20). Wiebe’s depiction of the Tetsot’ine response to the “great traveling world” that they find themselves in resonates with Owens’s perspective of the “delicate equilibrium” whose maintenance is part of humankind’s “irreducible responsibility.” The Tetsot’ine response and ability in and to their setting is one of humility as they identify themselves as those who “know something a little” (4, 19, 29). The Tetsot’ine are always aware that finding their precarious place here means being part of a continuous dynamic of attending carefully to its life. The animals may migrate by the hundreds one season and be few in numbers the next. The weather is changeable. At the center of their world lies a mystery too large for their finiteness: this in sharp contrast to the language of mastery that the officers of the expedition assume.

However, this humility does not mean that their relationship in this household is a passive one. Their listening adds to their agency and leads to transformation as they develop themselves into “a new creature, one winged to walk on snow” (86). One of the ways that the Tetsot’ine find themselves at home is to create the snowshoe to help them travel swiftly. Keskarrah’s life (and therefore all of theirs) depends on “how swift as a bird he can run over the valley snows where the shovel-footed caribou...themselves sometimes flounder and die” (83). The snowshoe allows the Tetsot’ine to survive starvation in the grip of winter, freeing them to travel lightly over the snow as they hunt the migrating caribou.

As she weaves the webbing onto the frame of a snowshoe, Greenstockings, daughter of Keskarrah and Birdseye, imagines “whoever crosses the brief memory these shoes will leave on snow,” and evokes humility in her keen sense of how short-lived are the human traces on the wind-swept enduring land (86). Her dreaming also highlights the sophisticated response that the Tetsot'ine have made within the web of relationships that they are an active part of since the snowshoe's imprint speaks of how each member of the household has contributed to the making of this new creature. Whoever reads the imprint on the snow

will recognize [Greenstockings weaving], and recognize her father [Keskarrah] who bent the wood, and recognize the caribou [whose sinews make up the webbing], and the birch tree [whose wood provides the frame], because all together in the great traveling world they have made a new creature, one winged to walk on snow, on snow where caribou are the core of all life like the moss and lichen they eat...(86).

The Tetsot'ine have cultivated “a new creature” with the help of the birch tree and the caribou, a creature who moves within the complex of relationships being described here. The snowshoes are part of her people's response to the land, and when they are tied on to a human's feet they create a creature, one whose “wings” allow the people “to walk on snow.”

Wiebe contrasts this light movement that transforms how the Tetsot'ine can live here to the preponderance of the English expedition. The Tetsot'ine “find” themselves at home through the lightness the snowshoes give them and as she repairs

a shoe's webbing Greenstockings "weaves herself into a giant, winged raven lifting away, rising over island and rapids to be held on delicate eddies of curling air, spiraling, soaring to hang motionless as ash over the conical lodges of the People" (83). While the English set themselves above the life of this household, Greenstockings envisions the "winged raven" that soars is fragile as "ash" that hangs in the air, and is never separate from their habitation on the earth. "Finding" and "making" oneself at home: these are layered and complex in Rudy Wiebe's portrayal of this meeting of the Tetsot'ine and the English expedition, as he imagines the profound differences between their approach to and cultivation of the longstanding relationships within a particular place.

### **Past, Present and Future in a Story-Soaked Place**

Play is formidable precisely because it is loose in the world, planting its *mediations* everywhere, *shattering the illusion of the immediacy of the real*....the contemporary search for some narrative continuity with the past is not just nostalgic escapism.... (Ricoeur 106, 109 emphasis added)

'The time is out of joint,' says Hamlet.....Time is disarticulated, *dislocated*, *dislodged*, time is....on the run and run down, deranged, both out of order and mad. Time is *off its hinges*, time is off course, beside itself, disadjusted" (Derrida 18, emphasis added).

As the above description of the English expedition in Rudy Wiebe's *Strangers* illustrates, those who *make* themselves at home do so through different kinds of detachment. These detachments silence, or, as Derrida so aptly describes, *disarticulate* the dialogue that has been going on *over time* between the human and more than human life of a place. When time and place are dislodged from one another, when the longstanding relationships in this place are unhinged, there is no way of addressing the specific injustices committed here. Since there is no process of redress, the consequences are ongoing. Jacques Derrida speaks of the murder of Hamlet's father as the injustice that puts the *time* "out of joint" in Denmark and in Hamlet's life. I will extend his description to show how in Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners* home-coming and story telling are inextricably linked to acknowledging all the stories that soak one's birthplace, and how attending to those stories offers a way into a future where this place could be found hospitable once again. Laurence explores both how denial of past injustices ruptures the ongoing "on time" relationships in a place so that the life of a place, along with its people, also becomes "unhinged, disarticulated... dislocated." As her main characters put their disparate memories side by side, Laurence explores what it means to "come home again."

In *Discovery of Strangers* the Tetsot'ine elder Keskarrah notes that the land "and the sky over it in any place" tell the stories "of all people who had ever lived there, and therefore [each place is] greater than any person or two, could comprehend" (24). The name of a place is related to the story of the Tetsot'ine

people's lives, since "of course, every place already *was* its true and exact name...each name a story complete in their heads....[these names lived] in their lifetime ... the way any Tetsot'ine must if they *would live the life of this land*" (24, emphasis added).

While a narrative that expresses a specific worldview shapes a particular place, this place is also layered with the stories of what has happened here over time. These events also shape this place where people are either born or arrive. The fire that the English expedition sets wrecks havoc in the household the Tetsot'ine are a part of; Margaret Laurence's characters Morag and Brooke try to burn another kind of landscape, rendering it equally featureless. These are the landscapes of their respective birthplaces. One of the questions that arises in *The Diviners* is: how does a denial of the losses experienced in time in a particular place affect its ability to be a home place?

The argument that the past -- the stories and events of a particular place and time -- are no longer relevant to the present is alive and well. And to judge by the following report, the "irrelevance" of the past goes hand in glove with the idea that this land was empty of all culture and civilization before Europeans set foot here. In a debate over the relevance of teaching history in the 2007 Canada Day edition of *The Globe and Mail*, John Ibbitson claims that "none of the one million people who are arriving here every four years care, nor should they ....about the rebellions of 1837 or the hanging of Louis Riel" ("Should"). Ibbitson goes on to valorize the myth that "music, science and political philosophy are all largely

Western achievements [and that] hope for humankind lies in the ingenuity and the civilized standards of the West.” He suggests that adherence to this myth is how to “get on with the job of improving things” (“Should”). Curiously, Ibbitson claims that adherence to the myth that major cultural achievements are exclusively Western provides, he claims, the cure for “the grave injustices [that] were inflicted on Canada’s native people” and that “their relentless obsession with those injustices prevents too many native leaders” from ‘getting ahead’ (“Should”). Forgetting the past: forgetting the justice and injustice that are enacted in a particular time and place is Ibbitson’s idea of the way into the future.

Paul Ricoeur writes that “we must have a sense of the meaningfulness of the past if our projections into the future are to be more than empty utopias” (103). One small news item highlights the importance of the stories that are part of the historical topography of any place. In its June 2008 official apology to the First Nations the federal government of Canada acknowledged the legacy of cultural genocide that occurred through the over 100 years of residential schooling. On the eve of this apology, at a reception hosted by the Assembly of First Nations, Jackie, a young Chinese woman introduced herself to United Church moderator David Giuliano. He learned that she had just immigrated to Canada and asked “how she came to be among the crowd of survivors, Aboriginal leaders, church folk and sundry politicians”; she answered that she had “heard about these schools” and thought she should come *if she was “going to live in Canada”* (Giuliano, emphasis added). In her reply Jackie explicitly expresses her understanding that

living in Canada includes beginning to learn about not just the myths of its national landscape, but all of the stories and events that have shaped this land. Her witness of this event is part of the careful listening that a place asks of a newcomer: this complicated place where stories continue to collide, this place shaped by ongoing dialogue.

Margaret Laurence's portrayal in *Diviners* of Brooke and Morag's relationship provides a powerful exploration of what denying the past means. Her exploration of the dynamics of this relationship brings to mind Ricoeur's claim that imaginative "play," such as Laurence's story-telling, "is formidable precisely because it is loose in the [particular] world" that would like to unhinge the stories of a place from the present time here (106). Laurence's portrayal of the denial of the past and the consequences it has for Brooke's and Morag's relationship 'shatters' what Ricoeur calls "the illusion of the immediacy of the real," an illusion that Ibbitson insists upon in his claim that the past is meaningless (106). Laurence's portrayal and homage to the stories that soak one's birthplace or place of arrival evoke Ricoeur's claim that "the contemporary search for some narrative continuity with the past is not just nostalgic escapism" (109).

The initial and mutual agreement between Morag and Brooke to refuse their histories puts Morag literally out of place (Manawaka) and out of time. This displacement is set in motion from their first romantic encounters as Brooke replies to Morag's incredulity: "What do I like about you?....Perhaps it's your mysterious nonexistent past. I like that. It's as though you were starting life now,

newly” (195). In their denial of the “story-soaked” places that are a part of them, Brooke and Morag can be described as the well-housed homeless. Their life in the apartment building Crestwood *Towers* is literally off the ground, a “space” they have created for themselves: a featureless limbo. While Morag’s adopted father Christie grounds himself in and confronts the “muck” of the past and the present as he tends the “nuisance grounds” (the garbage dump) of Manawaka, in Laurence’s portrayal of Brooke she explores a character who suspends himself above the “nuisance” of the “muck” that is the specific time and place of his birthplace.

Morag comes to understand that once Brooke “would have been a six-year-old who had to teach himself never to give in, never to reveal his pain” and that he will never allow himself to “descend” into the complicated world that is his birthplace (220). She hears him moan “Minoo,” in his sleep; Minoo was his childhood nurse whose touch not only helped to sooth away the neglect he experienced but also roused him sexually and one day brought his father’s shaming indictment on his head. Skelton will not “brook” this story, and through Brooke’s character, Laurence describes the oppressiveness of the featureless space created by his denial of the past and his longing for a fantasized home. Ironically, he wishes to “run a tea plantation,” reproducing one place where imperial control was exercised in colonized India, his birthplace. In his fantasy, this plantation would be “somewhere very remote, away from the varied awfulness of this world [but]....there is ... no place, really to go or to get away” (227). Brooke has exiled



himself, an exile “perpetuated by a cultural amnesia”; he is “ ‘one who forgets everything, including the roads leading homeward. Forgetting marks the end of human experience, and of longing too’ ” (Elie Wiesel, qtd. in Bouma-Prediger 9). In refusing the past he is also refusing the future.

A refusal of the past also, following Ricoeur, creates ‘empty utopias,’ and in Laurence’s portrayal Brooke’s utopist view is not benign but the breeding ground for tyranny. He comes to enforce his characterization of her as a perpetual “little one,” and although at first she readily accepts this in her own attempt to escape the “too old, too knowing” person she perceives herself to be, her resistance to being frozen in time grows to become an internal force (196). She begins to recognize that they live in a fortress sealed off by this denial of the past. In his paternalistic treatment of Morag’s growing desire to develop her voice through her writing, which inevitably brings her to draw on the well of her past experiences, Brooke denies Morag her past, in effect trying to ‘disarticulate’ her.

Laurence traces the power of a denial of the stories that soak the place which one is born into not only through Brooke and Morag but also in the relationship between the Métis and the Scots immigrants whose stories of Canada’s founding completely obliterate the stories that are present in this place though the Métis Tonnerre family. Jules is silenced and the story of the Métis “time [and place are]... disarticulated” also in Manawaka whenever in grade school “The Maple Leaf Forever” is sung by the descendents of the mythic Piper Gunn. The “peace” that is imposed when only one voice is allowed is a false one

since it silences all other articulations in a story-soaked place. Métis and First Nations' history and cultures continue to be rendered out of place as these voices are denied and Canada remains haunted by a legacy of continuing injustice. The time and place are "out of joint" because injustice remains buried. Ibbitson's claims continue the dislocations created by the residential school system as they both proudly assert that only one culture can get at the truths inherent in being civil, in living a civilized way of life. This pride denies the profoundly devastating effects, for example, that a western way of life has had on the household that is this earth.

Morag herself becomes one of those "external forces [that] batter at the gates" as her desire and need for a place of dialogue grows, and she finally actively refuses Brooke's habitual diminishment, his naming her "Little One." As she declares herself, her voice takes up the cadences of the "mother tongue" she has absorbed from Christie:

*Little one.* Brooke, I am ...five feet eight inches tall, which has always seemed too bloody christly tall to me but there it is, and by judas priest and all the sodden saints in fucking Beulah Land, I am stuck with it and I do not *mind* like I did once.... (256).

These cadences, the "watermark" of her birthplace, return to Morag's speech as she reinvests herself in the story-soaked place, this place in flux that is "Christie's real country. Where I was born" (390-391). In fact, when she leaves the space

that Brooke constructs – that is supposedly sanitized of the past – Morag gives herself over to the “muck” of the true difficulties of what it means to be at home.

**The Importance of What Really Happened: “You have to go home again, in some way or other.”**

Every creature is always somewhere. Placement is as fundamental to creaturehood as being dated.... To have a birthplace is like having a watermark on the paper of your subsequent pilgrimage. If you ever belonged someplace, grew up there, that spot on earth or territory where you put down roots serves as a home base, where you now come from.

(Seerveld, “Cities”)

Julie Kazlik, a Manawaka acquaintance Morag’s age, visits Morag after discovering that they both live in Vancouver. Morag has just fled her relationship with Brooke Skelton, and finds herself “one of the inmates” of a boarding house that she names “Bleak House,” pregnant with the child she has conceived with Jules, and alone (242). During this visit Julie speaks to “the watermark” of their shared birthplace: “We all head west, kiddo. We think it’ll be heaven on earth....and every time we meet someone from back home we fall on their necks and weep. Stupid, eh?” But then Laurence writes: “Neither of them think it is stupid. You Can’t Go Home Again, said Thomas Wolfe. Morag wonders now if it may be the reverse which is true. You have to go home again, in some way or other” (248). Bouma-Prediger and Walsh suggest that Thomas Wolfe’s claim that

“You can’t go home again” has become “a truism of postmodern culture,” and they quote Mohanty and Martin’s suspicion of home as “an illusion of coherence and safety based on the exclusion of specific histories of oppression and resistance, the repression of difference within oneself”(143). However, Laurence challenges this suspicion, instead envisioning a home-making that occurs through difficult dialogues between people from the same birthplace, dialogues that continue to wrestle with the stories that have collided here. Jules and Morag do ‘go home again’ wherever they meet; in each encounter they again face the exclusions that were part of their birthplace. Laurence does not hold to the narrative that home is an ‘illusion of coherence and safety’ based on enforced sameness and the silencing of other histories and cultures. Manawaka is the home Morag and Jules hold in common, and this storied place is so palpable that when they meet “someone from back home,” they “fall on” each other’s “necks and weep.”

Laurence’s view that “you have to go home again, in some way or other” is borne out in Jules and Morag’s relationship. When she is ready to become again grounded in the complicated place and community she calls home Morag encounters Jules on the streets of Toronto. They hold between them the tension of the stories that collide in their birthplace: the real events that marked both their growing up years and the legacy of disdain and racism on which these real events are founded. Although both are far from Manawaka, they need one another in order to enact a homecoming.

Besides the homelessness that is perpetuated by the assumption that “you can’t go home again,” and that a search for home is “nostalgic escapism,” a sense of homelessness can also be found in a postmodern relativism that claims historical realities are unreadable. In her important essay on post-colonial identity in *The Diviners*, Karen MacFarlane writes that “home” in Laurence’s novel is an imaginary, provisional ‘place to stand on’ which is articulated through an elaborate process of mythmaking and storytelling. Stories, histories, and identities are unstable in Morag Gunn’s narrative, and this instability ....and their provisionality....is where their value lies” (229 - 230).

MacFarlane bases her claim on an early entry Morag makes in her journal: “A popular misconception is that we can’t change the past – everyone is constantly changing their own past, recalling it, revising it. *What really happened? A meaningless question.*” (*Diviners* 60, emphasis added). MacFarlane cites Morag’s musings at the beginning of the novel to argue that the truth of historical events is groundless, beyond recovery. However, MacFarlane abstracts Morag’s musing that “What really happened” is “a meaningless question,” lifting it from its place in the *sequence* of Laurence’s story. Laurence strategically places Morag’s notion near the *beginning* of the novel, at the beginning of Morag’s quest for a place to belong.

In fact, Laurence arranges this scene so that it is juxtaposed with “Memorybank Movie: The Thistle Shamrock Rose Entwine the Maple Leaf Forever.” Here Laurence portrays how “what really happened” between the Métis

and settlers continues to be erased. The young schoolgirl Morag has absorbed the myth of the British empire when she cheerfully sings “The Maple Leaf Forever” as part of her official schooling. Jules’s refusal to sing makes his classmate uncomfortable so that she is ready to put salt on the wound of this perpetual erasure with her kneejerk response: “he comes from nowhere. He isn’t anybody” (61). The truth of Jules’s silent protest is grounded in historic specificities, and the truth of “what really happened” to the Métis is crucial; in this scene Laurence’s awareness of ‘what really happens’ creates a silence that is made eerie because of the unspoken understory here.

In the Stony Brook Colloquy, “Confronting Imagination,” Richard Kearney explores the implications of what he calls a postmodern undecidability in relation to the melding of fiction and history:

I think that even if you give a positive reading of [this undecidability] you still have an ethical problem....If we can no longer distinguish the real from the imaginary, then we have no way of knowing what happened. You have no response. Under these circumstances, there is no such thing as a fact. Everything is an interpretation of a fact....But I argue we *do* have a duty to decide between these competing narratives.... The epistemological question of ‘What actually happened?’ raises a very real ethical problem. (“Confronting Imagination” 270-271).

Kearney argues for a “singular [historical] truth” as he uses the denial of the holocaust under the Nazis during World War II as an example of the relativism that insists that all historical accounts are open to interpretation (271).

Laurence persistently unearths the myth that the young Morag has absorbed: that Jules “comes from nowhere. He isn’t anybody.” Wherever they go, both carry all the ramifications of this myth that collides with what really happened, this collision that has shaped their birthplace, and the tensions between the “singular historical truth” and the myth surfaces when they meet. In fact, as Jules and Morag mature the question of “what really happened” gains more meaning. For example, while he is away from Manawaka, a fire razes the Tonnere homestead and Jules’s sister Piquette and her children die in the blaze. Morag, as the young reporter for the *Manawaka Banner*, is sent to give an eyewitness report of the scene. Years later, when Jules and Morag are reunited in Toronto, “what really happened” in the event of Piquette’s death lies between them so powerfully that when Jules says “there’s something you gotta tell me about. You never told me, away back then,” Morag immediately knows that this is what he is referring to (223). When she tells him Jules throws up, curses and finally weeps and this very act is a way of returning home, of turning home so that what was suffered there can begin to be lamented. Between them Jules and Morag carry the stories that continue to collide in Manawaka, and the tension and brokenness of “what really happened” in the long legacy of the repeated displacement of the Métis is

manifested also in their relationship. Their relationship bears the story-soaked place of Manawaka as between them the stories exist side by side.<sup>41</sup>

In the same article on *The Diviners*, Karen MacFarlane claims that Laurence portrays “Christie and Prin, and Piper Gunn, Manawaka...[as] fictional constructions and reconstructions within and between which [Morag] is able to create a useful and contingent *mythology of herself*” (231, emphasis added). By valorizing individual mythmaking, (the self invention that Ahmed refers to) MacFarlane erases the way Laurence grounds Manawaka in the historical realities of the Métis and the settlers. Wherever Morag goes in her quest to divine where she belongs, her dialogue with the conflicted community of Manawaka continues. MacFarlane’s argument that Morag “creates a useful and contingent mythology for herself” out of “fictional constructions and reconstructions,” does not do justice to Laurence’s emphasis on how both Morag and Jules bear the “watermarks of their birthplace on the paper of their subsequent journeys,” journeys that *deepen* the dialogues they each continue with that birthplace of colliding narratives and communities.

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<sup>41</sup> Roger Epp revisits the need for reconciliation between First Nations and settler communities, arguing that humans are historical beings, with a “birthright” which “assumes that ‘we come into the world preceded by an inheritance’ that is collective, that extends over time, that we can disavow but do not choose, and that comes with ‘accumulated burdens’ as well as benefits” (“We are All” 134). First Nations and settlers, he argues, have a common history – like the biblical brothers who are enemies – Jacob and Esau. Epp’s discussion highlights this chapter’s theme of the importance of the stubborn particulars of the voices that rise from specific places. He argues that while “simple acknowledgement [of wrongdoing by the federal government] is an essential step in any process of reconciliation,” (137) it is too general, and that the work of reconciliation “is a task to be taken up without the cover of scholarship or the luxury of geographical distance” (127). He claims that “the most meaningful work of reconciliation...will lie in small, face-to-face initiatives for which the imperative is greatest where communities exist in close proximity” (138).



Laurence's development of this relationship counters this valorization of individual mythmaking and the presumption that individual interpretation makes historical truth provisional. The tensions that mark Morag's and Jules's relationship cannot be swept under the rug of "private" reconstructions or "individual mythologies," as if these do not get played out in the particular daily life of a specific place. Laurence sets her characters in "a relational, reciprocal condition that encompasses connection and community" and this condition includes colliding narratives, injustice and lament (Bouma-Prediger et al 248n25).

A critique of the *Diviners* that valorizes self-invention continues in Lyall Powers's reading of Morag and Jules when he describes their child Pique as part of their break-away, as "the offspring of two mavericks" (394). He casts them in romantic terms, as breaking free of tradition: "both rebels against traditional, civilized institutions, they are very nearly pagan or heathen in the eyes of proper society.... Their offspring is a *natural child*.... a natural symbol, like the river" (394). In his consistent use of the categories of "natural" and "civilized," he "fixes" both Jules and Brooke in a reading that valorizes the binaries of the primitive/civilized and the natural/cultural: "Jules is the simple, natural boy from [Morag's] hometown and the past she wishes to flee. Brooke is evidently the opposite of that – cultured, civilized, couth" (389). His reading implies that "tradition" is constricting, leaving no room for tradition as a potentially dynamic collective that includes a storied memory that soaks through the life and relationships of a particular place. Rather, within the binaries that Powers sets up,

tradition is given the same place as the “local knowledge” that Julie Cruikshank argues is “too often depicted as static, timeless, and hermetically sealed” (10).

There is much at stake in this kind of reading. Jules and Morag are not “mavericks” – they are deeply concerned with how their particular ancestries are part of the continuum of this time and place. For them, as well as for Pique, finding “a place to stand” is crucial and begins with the rigors of divining how their traditions have been “disarticulated” and “dislodged” in and around Manawaka. The diviners’s experience of this estrangement leads them to take up the tensions involved in standing in place so that the present time can become more habitable.

The final word in *Diviners* is given to Pique Gunn Tonnerre who, following her song-writing father, articulates through song all of the contradictions that make up *her* place: “When I think how I was born/ I can’t help but being torn/ But the valley and the mountain hold my name” (467). She is on her way to Galloping Mountain, where her father is buried in the Métis graveyard, and where his brother, Pique’s uncle Jacques Tonnerre “had his livingplace, his living place” (448). Here Pique will fill in the gaps through the “local knowledge” that her uncle is able to give her, knowledge that is “never crudely encapsulated in closed traditions, but” as Julie Cruikshank contends, “is produced during human encounters” (4). Pique will add to the story-soaked meaning that is the Métis place to stand.

Rudy Wiebe's *A Discovery of Strangers* also ends with the child of the strange encounter between Tetsot'ine Greenstocking and the English Robert Hood, who, in Greenstocking's reading will always remain "here, alive in every wolf and raven she sees, forever" (317). The strange encounter between her and Robert Hood has changed forever what it means for Greenstockings to live on this land, and she will raise this child in the "arctic light...in its impenetrable, life-giving cold" (317). The encounter between the Tetsot'ine and the English expedition bring yet more layers to this Arctic place (316). Eden Robinson's narrator Lisamarie finds consolation in the memories that are held by places such as Monkey Beach, where her brother came to life as he swam in the waters of Douglas Channel. In fact those she looked to for guidance at the end of Robinson's story urge her to *be* landed: to turn away from the (disembodied), the unreliable spirit world.

### **Conclusion: Earth's Lament, Intermediaries, and the "stubborn particulars of voice"**

This exploration of the relationship between stories and place is written in the context of a western philosophical tradition that "has a long history of looking down on the nonhuman world" (Zuidervaat). The cultivated detachments of Western rationalism continues to have their effect, to somehow justify the separation of economy from ecology by industry and government, that in turn continues to threaten to drive a wedge between place and the peoples who have

been in longstanding relationships there.<sup>42</sup> While this tradition and these institutional forces have done much to “suppress the groans of all creation,” I have also attempted to report those voices that are full of “stubborn particulars,” voices that have wedged open small places within and without those traditions (Cruikshank 17). These are voices that I will call intermediaries.

David Abrams describes the role of a “magician in a traditional culture” as one of mediation, of mediating “*between* the human community and the larger community of beings upon which the village depends for its nourishment and sustenance” (6). This intermediary would act “between the human community and the larger ecological field, ensuring that there is an appropriate flow of nourishment, not just from the landscape to the human inhabitants, but from the human community back to the local earth” (6). Abrams’s description of this role is limited by its exoticism in the sense that all of his examples are based in societies that are not highly industrialized, and, because the shamans he describes all live in relative isolation from the people. However, the work of mediation in the household that is this earth is crucial and there are intermediaries everywhere. For example, wetlands ecologist Calvin DeWitt’s mediating work took him into the political structure of mid-America when he became mayor of the small town of Dunn, south of Madison, Wisconsin. His stated purpose was to help the

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<sup>42</sup> Noting “how few traces of *human* suffering show up in this philosophical tradition,”<sup>42</sup> Zuidervaat immediately ties humans to their places in the ecological household as he declares how it is “equally remarkable how strongly this tradition has suppressed the groans of *all creation*” and in this chapter I attempt to articulate “earth’s lament” in a way that does not separate human from nonhuman exile, but interweaves them (ibid. Emphasis in text.).

townspeople see themselves as a part of the ecological household there, to draw people into an awe and wonder over the intricate web of relationships of which they were a part. As a result, the people voted to buy back large tracts of the town land that had been sold for “development,” and created a trust so that the land would be used for the traditional agriculture that had been part of the ecological life of the area. (Stafford, “God’s Green Acres”). The stubborn particulars that each place gives voice to through this mediating work is also articulated through Sximina of the Nuxalk peoples, Okanagan Jeanette Armstrong, Cherokee Louis Owens, First Nations peoples whose traditional longstanding relationships in the land are being revisioned by them. These all participate in one way or another in a vision of homecoming that will “respect and save the means for sustainable household, including... transfer of oral tradition, and maintaining and re-establishing seeds and roots of locally-adapted stocks” (DeWitt “When” 182).

In *Song of the Earth*, Jonathan Bate writes “art is the place of exile where we grieve for our lost home upon the earth” (qtd. in O’Brien). In keeping with the theme of this chapter that argues for the implicit and explicit physical relationships that give places their integrity, I would contest this abstract definition of place and of art. In her claim, that the storytelling of oral tradition is grounded in specific places Julie Cruikshank writes of the effect icefields have on the imagination of the people living in relation to them. In indigenous Athapaskan speakers’ stories, the glaciers figure as “actors” in terms of the “imaginative force that [they] exert on regional histories” of the Saint Elias Mountain divide (3). Likewise, in the

hard work and craft that is their art, Margaret Laurence, Rudy Wiebe and Eden Robinson also ground their characters in particular places on earth.

Julie Cruikshank cites Harold Innis, an economic historian who became... interested in how empires “manage the awkward problem of administering far-flung territories” (62). His study of the language that is used in this administration points to how “imperial regimes conventionally assert power by monopolizing and categorizing information and by routinely silencing local traditions that don’t fit official categories” (62).<sup>43</sup> Laurence’s portrayal of Morag’s and Jules’ relationship challenges many “official” categories that valorize self-invention, the “illusion of the immediacy of the real,” and the historical relativism that often corresponds with these. Rudy Wiebe’s portrays the same imperial self-invention and the congruent silencing of local traditions through the English expedition’s recordkeeping, their “measurements on blank paper.” This blank paper signifies the way their “monopolizing and categorizing information” erases “local tradition” that doesn’t fit their categories. Wiebe illustrates the life of the local tradition through Greenstockings’s, Keskarrah’s and Birdseye’s dreams, dreams and visions that hold all the stubborn particulars of their relationship with this place. Eden Robinson’s *Monkey Beach*, meanwhile, traces the lament of a community that is losing its language, language that held the stubborn particulars

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<sup>43</sup> Afterthought: use as an example the battle to admit stories and song as legitimate testimony in hearings as well as in land claims court cases. Cite Dickason on the impact of the stories on the MacKenzie Valley Pipeline Hearings, where because of their testimony about the life of the people, a moratorium was set on any construction. The stories wedged into the statistical reports etc, and showed that these could not give a full picture, that to go ahead would be to ignore the lives and the local knowledge of those who had a longstanding relationship here.

of the “tacit knowledge embodied in life experiences” in this place between the mountains and the ocean (Cruikshank 10). Through her writing Robinson imaginatively pulls away the bandages of official stories and powerfully traces the violence that these stories suppress. The story of *Monkey Beach* resists the language Alcan Aluminum and the residential schools used to portray themselves as being in the service of “producing knowledge and serving the interests of those administered,” language that “invariably occurs at the expense of exiting regional traditions” (Cruikshank 62). In these ways, each fictional story *as a story* acts as Laurence, Wiebe and Robinson employ the human and nonhuman voices that soak each place with meaning. ...

## Chapter Two: An Architecture of Belonging

While chapter one explored the meaning of being grounded, at home in terms of humankind's place *in* the ecological household, this chapter understands that humans are communal, are members *of* a clan, various communities and culture. Human relationships unfold within the particular boundaries of these communities, boundaries that mark the integrity of these relationships and this belonging. In this chapter I will ask how in their fictional narratives Niro, Robinson and Laurence take up violent exclusions and inclusions that stand in the way of belonging. As they portray characters who have been scattered do they suggest that home and belonging are ephemeral dreams? If not, how do they trace the structures within which their characters could begin to find belonging?<sup>44</sup>

### **Kitchen Debates, Hyper-mobility and Homesickness that “Went Underground”**

Mid twentieth century North American feminist critique of home and its connection to belonging was directed towards the ready made place given to women in a ready made kitchen whose technological advancement it was assumed, was enough to fulfill a woman's deepest desires. The infamous “kitchen debate” in 1959 between U.S. Vice President Richard Nixon and Soviet

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<sup>44</sup> Among the many meanings that The Random House Dictionary gives for “belong” and “belonging,” the following apply to this chapter: Belonging n. sense of security in friendship. Synonyms: acceptance, affinity, association, attachment, relationship. Belong v.1. be part of, be in proper place; 2. be affiliated with.



Premier Nikita Krushchev powerfully illustrates this worldview.<sup>45</sup> According to the patriarchal logic of this period, women were ‘put in their place,’ a place characterised by atomic family individualism, material prosperity and... technological progress.

In their valid critique, however, many American feminists continued to identify home with these characteristics. It continued to have an “inside” space where women were relegated over against an all important “outside”: a domain exclusively associated with masculinity. In the face of this narrow understanding of belonging and domesticity with its binary oppositions, “homesickness went underground” even as a “politically reactionary backlash against feminism” rose to the surface (Rubenstein 4). Although these tensions have changed, its dynamics are easy to trace in media representations of and responses to contemporary political figures of the U.S. Republican Sarah Palin and Democratic Hillary Clinton.

The homesickness that Rubenstein describes is, however, a longing for a much more complex dynamic: “a yearning for recovery or return to the idea of a nurturing, unconditionally accepting place/space” (Rubenstein 4). This place according to bell hooks is “where we return for renewal and self-discovery, where we can heal our wounds and become whole” (*Yearning* 49). hooks suggests that to

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<sup>45</sup> “The two men, meeting that day for the first time, leaned on the railing in front of the model General Electric kitchen, and through interpreters debated capitalism and communism by referencing not only nuclear weapons but washing machines” (“A Research Project on Cold War Material Culture” at [www.kitchendebate.org](http://www.kitchendebate.org)).

be/longing includes being known and accepted, that acceptance is a complex process and as she imagines home as a place where one can gather one's scattered self towards a certain wholeness, she evokes a place of reorientation.<sup>46</sup>

Richard Nixon's assumptions in the 1950s mirror the assumptions of colonizing nations, that the shape they give to belonging is also universal: that British law, governance and thought for example, could be successfully applied anywhere in the world, and they were an improvement over the belonging and identity Indigenous peoples had forged. This repression of differences resulted in violent exclusions and inclusions.

As the last chapter illustrated, for First Nations home and belonging are founded on historic relationships bound up in identity with land, with developing a way of life that involves careful attendance to the land and ecological household. As they valorize mobility, however, others speak of the "tyranny of geography" (qtd in Bouma-Prediger and Walsh 272). In response to a former Microsoft vice president's claim that computers "liberate us from the 'tyranny of geography'" Julia Keller in the *Chicago Tribune* asks "Could belonging somewhere and having a stake in that somewhere really be all that bad?" She muses that "Maybe that quiet yearning for a home, a wish long denied, is behind more of the world's darkness than we are ready to admit" (qtd in Bouma-Prediger and Walsh 272).

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<sup>46</sup> In her recent text entitled *Belonging*, hooks makes strong connections between place and belonging, more in terms that Chapter One describes. She associates belonging with her return to and connection with the Kentucky place where she was born and raised; this connection also includes reflection on her place in this particular ecological household, which she develops through conversations with another Kentuckian: Wendell Berry.

Because of the ways patriarchal views narrow the meaning of home and colonizing forces hollow out cultural identity, for many cultural critics home is deconstructed as an illusory “never, never land of dreams and desire. Home is utopia – a no place, a nowhere, an imaginary space longed for, always already lost in the very formation of the idea of home” (qtd in Bouma-Prediger and Walsh 242). Because home is an unattainable ideal, not being home is closer to reality for many such critics. In fact, in escaping home, one is freed from, relieved of this “illusion of coherence and safety” (qtd in Bouma-Prediger and Walsh 243).

While some postmodern thinkers focus on the notion that freedom is an individual experience, a freedom *from* the demanding and complicated relationships and place that is home, it is just this complex richness that signifies home, and that Rubenstein, hooks and Keller long for. Bouma-Prediger and Walsh identify this individual with the figure of the tourist who, they argue, has much in common with the “global capitalist”: “the tourist’s aesthetic capacity is, of course, a consuming capacity that can only be afforded because of the possession of capital. The freedom of the tourist to travel is purchased, and the volume of freedom depends solely on the ability to pay” (Bouma-Prediger and Walsh 253). Both the tourist and the global capitalist, then, “remain deeply homeless because being at home is seen to be a limiting of choices and requires an acknowledgment that we are not autonomous but interdependent and interrelated homemakers” (263). As they each fly from place to place they fly *through* the boundaries that signal the integrity of cultural identity and their sense of belonging diminishes,

along with their ability to respond to the particulars of relationships that are shaped in specific locales. Increasingly, the force of “a culture of hypermobility” where the individual “migrates through widely divergent social, cultural, and geographical worlds” threatens what it takes to be a part of a particular social and cultural community in a specific locale (263).

### **An Architecture of Belonging**

In the wake of this transience the connection between belonging and architecture is important because it assumes dwelling, takes up *indwelling* that depends on staying put, on slow and careful building on and repair that keeps foundations solid. Discussions of belonging and scattering often implicitly use images of building, of being inside or outside, inclusion and exclusion, of being on the margins or in a center, walled in or walled out. In this chapter the main features that will be explored are the threshold, walls, windows and the centrality of a particular culture’s hearth fire which gathers those who have been scattered. It is striking that in her discussion of Indigenous literary nationalism, Lisa Brooks refers repeatedly to kitchens as gathering places. Cultural belonging is implicit in the growing discussion of Indigenous literary nationalism which points out important distinctions between various Indigenous nations and encourages critique based on a nation’s specific history and knowledge. In her afterword to a text on American Indian literary nationalism, Lisa Brooks describes how so many of the conversations important to her own nation’s consolidation in the face of ongoing

and multi-layered attempts to erase her people's identity took place around the kitchen table, an area that this chapter associates with a cultural hearth fire.

While this is a discussion of cultural identity that takes place *amongst* a particular people, Brooks goes on to issue an invitation in which the kitchen table functions as a place where neighbouring peoples can also gather, where peoples with different cultural identities may begin to develop mutuality and understanding. "I believe," Lisa Brooks writes

we are inviting everyone to make their way to the kitchen table, to come to the gathering place. I am not saying that you (or we) will always be welcome there, given the weight of history, or that it will be an easy journey, but I can promise that there will be some food and good conversation waiting for those who come willing to listen, and to reciprocate, in turn. (246)

Lisa Brooks opens up the narrow definition of the 1950s kitchen to describe a gathering place that offers a scattered people a cultural hearth fire where belonging to a peoplehood unfolds, and, that brings together neighbours around the challenges of developing mutual respect.

Foundations, thresholds, hearth fires: the complex structures of belonging are well served in architectural terms. For example, the *Dictionary of Architecture and Construction (DAC)* has 56 entries for "window," definitions which carefully stipulate the various functions of and ways to construct this opening that lightens an otherwise dark interior, where one can look out, or look in, can open for air to

freshen a stuffy interior, or close against storm.<sup>47</sup> The following questions are meant to create a dialogue through the metaphor of architecture about what it means to belong also in the fictional narratives of Shelley Niro's films, Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners*, and Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach*. How do the texts complicate the binaries that (over) simplify the process of belonging, the meaning of threshold, of hearth fire? What is it that makes up the density of a solid foundation? How do walls and boundaries work to establish or to destabilize individual and cultural identity and belonging? What are the processes of unfolding that take place in the domain of the hearth fire? How do the texts imagine the work of the threshold?

Besides a threshold and a hearth fire, this chapter will argue that cultural and individual belonging take place within boundaries, that a "boundary is not that at which something stops but...is that from which something begins in its essential unfolding" (Quoted in Walsh et al 54).

Rafters, walls, doors and foundations are all boundary markers and essential for individual, familial and cultural identity. They provide a context within which relationships can unfold; they mark the necessary inside and outside that honours the integrity of identity. The intimately inhabited place of the hearth

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<sup>47</sup> At the same time this extensive entry describes the *cultural* shape of windows in terms of western contemporary buildings. The longhouse, on the other hand, features the complexity of belonging in Huron as well as Haudenosaunee terms. In these constructions rafters, for example, function in more complex ways than the fixed rafters of most western houses since the longhouse needed to signify how the five separate fires of the affiliated nations, a complex alliance were accommodated. These rafters also needed to be constructed for flexibility, so that they could be extended to shelter the hearth fire of other nations who might join the alliance.

fire, for example, requires boundaries, as does the complex unfolding that develops at the threshold. The essential unfolding that takes place at *both* the hearth fire and the threshold is an unfolding whose purpose is not to “stop something from coming in (though that remains part of the safety-producing function of boundaries)” as much as to “provide a context for a certain kind of... opening up” that occurs within these domains (Walsh et al 54). This unfolding eschews notions of home as only ever a self-protective static place where belonging is exclusive and fixed.

And neither are the threshold and hearth fire fixed in specific places. As I illustrated in Lisa Brooks’s description of the functions of the kitchen table, they are structurally ambiguous, domains that mark different functions. As a domain, each functions as “a realm or range of personal knowledge, responsibility, etc., a sphere of activity, concern, or function.”<sup>48</sup> Exchange, for example, is only one of the activities that take place in the domain of the threshold. It can also signal different kinds of ‘coming of age’ suggested by the 1834 meaning of threshold as “the line which one crosses,” with “the youth stepping proudly upon the threshold of womanhood” (*The Compact OED*, 1971). This particular unfolding is related to what happens within the domain of the hearth fire, when an infant “unfolds”: stands unsteadily on the threshold of being sure footed, takes up the cadences that

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<sup>48</sup> “domain.” The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition. Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004. 14 Dec. 2009. <[Dictionary.com  
http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/domain](http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/domain)>.

will become the articulate speech of his mother tongue.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, boundary markers are gradually expanded by parents, for example, as the newborn grows into a toddler who experiments with walking, talking, testing her own abilities and limitations. The construction of this as a secure place has nothing to do with fortress building; rather it is bound up in trust that this be a place of unfolding so that boundaries are always subject to adjustment, for example, as the young one proudly takes on more responsibility, thriving in her/his new skills. I begin with this illustration because belonging begins, or is broken, in domestic places, is shaped in its complex interiors. It would be a mistake to draw even this beginning belonging in simplistic terms; the inside and outside of belonging is complicated by the elasticity of those boundaries that mark the domains of threshold and hearth fire.

### **Walls and Exteriorities in Service of a Dominant Story**

While the boundaries that signal the integrity of a person and a culture are essential to their identity and their ability to be reciprocal, other boundaries work to place a demonized or idealized other ‘beyond the pale.’ The wall/obstacle of this boundary is manifested not only in brick or concrete but also in the symbolic world through which one culture controls another through its representation. The

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<sup>49</sup> This sense of unfolding brings to mind what an Ojibwa woman told Rupert Ross about her language: that it did not fix people in a state of being, but identified a person using “verb-oriented” terms. In Ojibway, she said, “all of life is a process and every person is a ‘thing-which-is-becoming...someone-in-the-making,’ as opposed to a ‘thing-that-is’” (Ross 187).



field of architecture offers fitting descriptions for the way a colonized culture is “covered” by mainstream news media; for example, it describes a “blank, blind or dead wall” as one whose “surface is unbroken by a window, door, or other opening.”<sup>50</sup> Since it leaves no opportunity for exchange, since all the places of possible exchange - a window or door – are either sealed off or carefully guarded and controlled, the fixed representations of another culture by a dominant one forms a “dead wall.” In architectural terms, the “fixed, unvarying form” of the representations constructed in dominant culture make up the “facework” of this wall, hiding from public view the “hearting,” that which “forms the interior of a wall” (“Hearting.” *DAC*). In effect, stereotypes function as the “facework” that a dominant culture projects and these “unvarying and fixed forms...formulaic, oversimplified images”<sup>51</sup> hide the complex interiority, or “hearting” of that culture: the particular way it shapes belonging. This description resonates with another insight into the way stereotypes work to present an oversimplified face of another culture. South African writer Njabulo Ndebele, in his description of the way the apartheid regime represented coloured and black peoples there, refers to this facework as “spectacle” and characterized it as giving a “vast sense of presence without offering intimate knowledge” a presence and presentation that preferred “exteriority to interiority,” (49-50). The interiority that signifies the layered particularity of a person or a culture is walled off. The spectacle of these

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<sup>50</sup> “Blind, Blank, and Dead Wall.” *DAC*.

<sup>51</sup> “stereotype.” *The American Heritage Dictionary*.

images, as it pretends to be the ultimate word, has the fixity of a wall. Even as it walls another in, the dominant culture allows *only* this exterior to represent the culture in the public mind.

In “You’re not the Indian I had in Mind,” Thomas King traces the history of photographic stereotyping that “fixes” Native peoples in the U.S. through the career of American photographer Edward Sheriff Curtis who in the early 1900s produced “some 40,000 negatives” of the *idea* of the North American Indian (King *The Truth* 34). “Determined to capture that idea, that image, before it vanished,” Curtis traveled from one tribe to another with a box of props: “wigs, blankets, painted backdrops, clothing—in case he ran into Indians who did not look” like the formulaic idea Curtis had constructed in his imagination (34). Curtis frames Indigenous peoples as if they are “still-life.” His typecasting erases distinctions between First Nations cultures and freezes them in an imagined past; these representations hide, obscure, and abstract First Nations from their ongoing everyday lives.

While Curtis’s images create a “facework” of abstracted idealizations, a thick layer of mainstream news media images also demonizes First Nations, so that the public cannot see through the generalization that First Nations who have survived are hopelessly mired in dependency. Almost 100 years after Curtis’s project, in Shelley Niro’s *It Starts With A Whisper*, the main character Shanna speaks of the overwhelmingly negative news media images of First Nations people: “so self-destructive. Suicide. Alcohol. Drugs.” This young woman

recognizes neither herself nor her own people in the facework made up of these images. Filmed in the wake of the 1990 summer events at Oka, Quebec, Shanna's lament in *It Starts* also expresses Niro's response to the wall created by the mass media that literally "covered" the complex history and politics of the conflict at Oka.

Here, the Mohawk of Kanehsatake united to resist the town council's plan to turn an area of its territory, which included traditional burial grounds and the place where they have gathered medicines for generations, into a nine-hole addition to a local golf club. This attempted expropriation reflected the long history of how the lands of this area had been coercively exchanged between the English and the French for centuries, in violation of treaty agreements. In response, to the proposed extension of the golf course, the Kanehsatake Mohawks blockaded a bridge. In the face of the way the Canadian state notoriously stone-walls the due process of land claims, this action was meant to get the attention of the Canadian public, a way of 'cutting a window' in the wall of images set before the public.<sup>52</sup>

This "facework" hides the heart of the walled-in people. The troublesome details of this legacy of expropriation at Oka were suppressed by the use of the image of a masked Mohawk warrior staring down a very young-looking white

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<sup>52</sup> The notion that First Nations are attempting to create their own laws outside of the Canadian state's jurisdiction, for example, serves to blind the public to the ongoing reality that belonging between First Nations and the Canadian state is not the belonging that is understood by the domain of the hearth fire. The treaties that remain binding belong to the domain of the threshold, where different nations and states meet, since these treaties explicitly signal the exchange between two nations. The images that are fixed, that assume First Nations have not shaped their own laws, reinforce the wall as they assume there is no need for a place where First Nations are recognized as equal partners with the Canadian state.

Canadian soldier. This famous image from the cover of *Maclean's*, while it suggests some gun slinging Mafioso style warrior, hides much: that the warrior was not even a Mohawk, that in fact his name is Brad Laroque, a Métis student of Economics at the University of Saskatchewan. The repeated use of this image during the confrontation at Oka presented a “vast presence,” a thick exteriority that hid much. Rather than being “worth a thousand words,” in its vacuous presence this image created a monologue, a “voice over” that silenced the many voices that had for over 270 years revealed about the distinct differences between European and First Nations’ worldviews of land. Besides how it hid the complex interiority of the Kanehsatake Mohawks’ life in this area over time, it also did not reveal the Canadian state’s bad faith in terms of the negotiations underway: that even as these were being held, the federal government was increasing its armed presence at Oka to 2,600 Canadian soldiers.

This armed force in itself created a climate that suggested this was a “war on terror,” that boundaries of self-protection needed to be reinforced so that, along with the vast presence of news media images, these boundaries signified both a fortress and a prison where “the walls are simply too thick... too impenetrable” for sound to carry through (Walsh et al 53). This exteriority erased the historical context as it set up a tyranny of the moment so that, along with another of spectacle’s many tools, the sound bite of the thirty-second “news,” respectful dialogue became impossible. The spectacle that played on the blank wall at Oka concealed, in the public mind, the everyday life of the Mohawk people as it

unfolds and continues. As it walled off that life it evoked a response in Shelley Niro's film *It Starts With a Whisper*, filmed and produced a year later.

### **“Precious Windows on our Worlds”**

Because [Shelley Niro's work] is historical, political, and playful, [it] serves as precious windows on our worlds, worlds that are finally envisioned by us and windows that have finally been made by us. (Simpson 50)

In her short film *Overweight With Crooked Teeth* (1997), Shelley Niro deconstructs this wall of fixed and spectacular images and the exteriority that makes exchange impossible. *Overweight*<sup>53</sup> confronts those who produce these images, questioning the much-vaunted “objective” (blind, blank, neutral) view that supposedly frames these representations. She lifts the “cover” of the flat image to reveal the subjectivity of those who produce non-Native representations that stereotype and estrange Indigenous peoples and culture.<sup>54</sup> In its opening scene, a man in a three-piece suit comes into view as he walks towards a fixed camera that suggests a fixed viewpoint. Despite the brevity of this film, his approach takes time; when he comes nearer it becomes obvious that he is headed directly towards the camera. Rejecting any notion that its frame is blankly neutral, he purposefully strides right up to the subjective “eye” hidden behind the lens, and initiates an exchange, addressing the one who holds the camera and whom he holds

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<sup>53</sup> Written by Michael Doxtater, Niro's brother, who also plays the sole figure in the film.

<sup>54</sup> Its title is characteristic of Niro's ongoing humorous engagement with the glossed exteriority of the “ideal” human figure that is the stock in trade of many mass media images.

accountable and answerable for the exteriority of spectacular images. The question he asks is the implicit one that Thomas King asks of Edward Curtis: “am I not the Indian you had in mind?” The man in “Overweight” asks: “What were you expecting, anyway? Were you expecting Sitting Bull? Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce saying... ‘the earth and I are one’?” He questions non-Native portrayals that wall First Nations people within a mythic past or an idealized relationship with the earth. His eyes pierce through these portrayals and the “you” that he addresses includes not only the person behind the camera but the non-Native *viewer* of the expected stereotype as well. Indeed, by watching his approach and receiving his direct gaze, the stereotype-consuming audience also becomes conspicuous. Through this character Niro counters the eye that is hoodwinked by the facework of mainstream media, the I that selects and repeats the single image of the masked “Mohawk” warrior, the eye that decides to let this image stand and thicken.

While in this little film Niro makes the wall of dead images transparent by challenging the claim to objectivity, through other films she literally carves a window into this wall. In the quotation above Mohawk scholar Audra Simpson expresses how Niro creates “precious windows” which initiate exchange between Natives and non-Natives by offering non-Natives an alternative to the ready made and hopelessly fixed images that continue to be manufactured by a colonizing mindset. Not only does Niro create opportunities for inter-racial dialogue, in contrast to the negative images in which characters such as Niro’s narrator Shanna

(*It Starts*) cannot recognize himself or herself, but Simpson also notes how Niro's work draws Iroquois people together. "It serves," writes Simpson, "as a vehicle for Iroquois to contemplate each other, to laugh, to find resonance in these images, and in doing so... give us a past and a present that is all of our own" (Simpson 50). This is the work of belonging that this chapter identifies with the domain of the hearth fire. Instead of a flat exterior, Niro draws non-Natives to her windows in the wall even as she draws her own people to the place where they can recognize themselves, a place with a richly complex interior: the domain of the hearth fire. Niro replaces the exteriority of the dead wall with an "everyday" interiority that is multi-layered. It includes, for example, her choice to cast her sisters in the role of the Matriarchal Aunts/Clowns in *It Starts With a Whisper* as well as in the photographic series "Mohawks in Beehives." Of this choice she says: "I began using my family in my work [because] these familiar images are the common images I live with [and] the more images you see of somebody that looks like you the more you accept yourself" ("A Time"). These subjects are women by whom her Haudenosaunee audiences have felt welcomed, because "they can see their own aunts or their sisters in these images" ("A Time").

Through the windows she creates Niro invites the non-Native to consider the alternative hearth fire of the Haudenosaunee people. In her portrayal of the life and belonging around this hearth fire, she becomes, according to Mohawk curator Ryan Rice, a "keeper of the fire" (qtd in Loft 44). Rice reconfigures the figure of Iroquois women who "traditionally kept the central fire burning" arguing

that “today it is Iroquois artists who tend and sometimes stir our cultural fires, acting as tradition-keepers, story-tellers, innovators and social commentators” (qtd in Loft 44).

## Hearth Fires

1594 "The heart is the harth from whence proceedeth all that inset and natue heate."<sup>55</sup> (“Hearth.” *The Compact OED*, 1971)

An ideological home is a layering of generations of stories...the culmination of storyteller after storyteller, in a long chain of transmission. To be home...means to dwell in the landscape of ... collective memories, as opposed to being in exile. ...Furthermore, an ideological home, housed in collective memory, emerges from a specific location, spatially and temporally. (McLeod 19)

It is within the intimate domain of the hearth fire that belonging begins: where one’s own identity unfolds through recognition and nurturing, through those who tell the stories that have accumulated of one’s people over time. It is here that foundational stories and myths are challenged, tested and reinterpreted. A cultural home, as Cree scholar Neal McLeod describes it, is “housed in collective memory” made up of these stories of relationships and significant

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<sup>55</sup> I wish to highlight the direct connection made here between heart and hearth as well as suggest that whatever it is that sets the heart on fire will be manifested in a person’s or a culture’s day to day living.



events. One of the particular functions of this domain is to nurture identity so that it can be vital and abundant, building a capacity for falling in love *outward*, as the first quotation, the epigraph suggests. This nurturing work also prepares those around the fire to stand firm in the face of disorienting forces that undermine the foundation of values on which this hearth fire rests.

However, if these hearth memories are overwhelmingly of violent exclusions and inclusions, how can one begin to construct belonging? “Freeing yourself was one thing, claiming ownership of that freed self was another”: as she quotes Sethe, the protagonist in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, Satya Mohanty asserts that Sethe is “*articulating the constitutive cultural challenge of the postcolonial condition*” (“Epistemic” 47 emphasis added). Mohanty highlights how fundamental a safe environment is to “claiming ownership of [the] freed self,” since it is only within a place where one can begin to trust “oneself, one’s judgments, and one’s companions” that one can begin what Mohanty calls the crucial “act of remembering” the brutalities of the past (44). This remembering is an important antidote to what would otherwise be an “uncontrolled repetition” of that past. This trust and the activity that Mohanty calls “rememory” take place within the domain of the hearth fire (45). It is here that an alternative community and genealogy transforms the legacy of brutality. As they portray young characters whose cultural or personal past requires this work, each text studied in this chapter asks how they can move into a future that is not an “uncontrolled repetition” of this past. How is this particular work of the hearth fire portrayed?

The following section describes various features, conditions and activities that are important to the domain or life of the hearth fire. The condition of resonance, for example, highlights the importance of reciprocity and trust for belonging. As Mohanty notes, the labour of trusting is foundational for remembering the past and rebuilding alternative genealogies.

[A] condition of resonance is crucial in defining ‘home,’ that is, a place where you speak and someone answers. If there is no answer, you are someplace else. More formally, I would say ‘home’ is a place where there is a condition of resonance, or sound returned; that is, a place where you speak to a community *and it speaks back to you*. Lack of sound in this sense can be experienced as lack of *soundness*. (Senior 37; emphasis added).

One of the conditions for the nurturing security of the hearth fire is a condition of resonance. The soundness of the relationship depends on the listening, speech and response that develop between those within the relationship. A baby begins to read the faces of those around her and to respond with her own face: eyes light up in recognition, soon a smile appears and then, her own peculiar laughter is heard for the first time. She hears language and is encouraged to respond. This is a place where delight is taken as the child tests the sound of her own voice and uses body language to fill in what the voice cannot yet articulate of her thoughts, feelings and desires. This particular unfolding depends on the security of the domain of the hearth fire, on how members of this domain respond when the child tests and uses the word “NO!”

With this “no” the child tests, refines, and is encouraged to trust his own judgments so that he becomes secure within his own boundaries. In Eden Robinson’s *Monkey Beach*, there is no one to answer the young Josh’s “no” when as a child he is thrust into the world of the residential school. “There is no answer” to his person in a system founded on a determination to separate his cultural belonging from his being/ identity. As his mother tongue is forbidden here, he truly is “someplace else”: completely vulnerable and alone within this system, so that when he is invaded and overpowered by a priest who is a sexual predator, Josh’s voice is absorbed. He cannot or does not articulate what this invasion has done to him, so that the “lack of sound” in this place that overpowers his voice turns into a “lack of soundness.” His viable rage becomes a weapon, aimed indiscriminately as he himself begins to take advantage of the youth in Kitamaat.

Robinson’s portrayal of estrangement and belonging includes a strong sense of the boundaries that mark the integrity of each person and how these are overridden through the insidious nature of the sexual abuse that makes life in Kitamaat so dangerous for the young people of Lisamarie’s generation. Respect for these boundaries signifies soundness and the condition of resonance that is essential for this domain. Robinson’s focus on the legacy of retaliation and how it continues to silence people from one generation to another highlights the importance of these boundaries, and the retaliation and impossibility of retaliating that are a huge part of the tension in this novel, whose epigraph is cited as the Haisla proverb:

It is possible to retaliate against an enemy,

But impossible to retaliate against storms.

One of the “storms” that pervade the characters’ boundaries is institutional racism, and one of the ways it manifests itself is through the sexual abuse Josh is subjected to. This deeply embedded legacy is one against which he cannot possibly retaliate since deep disdain for First Nations peoples and culture becomes a systemic force that also protects the priest. Robinson’s portrayal of retaliation suggests that it perpetuates a culture of silence and silencing. While a condition of resonance includes the discourse of accountability, retaliation signals the violence of a legacy of silencing, where there are no avenues for answerability, and homesickness goes underground in this absence. Josh’s homesickness is passed on to the young people of the Haisla community that he in turn molests: a homesickness that begins in the malevolence of the unwelcome “embrace.”<sup>56</sup>

Being at-home, writes Olive Senior, requires “a condition of resonance, or sound returned....a community [that] speaks back to you.” M.M. Bakhtin’s theories, which center on language as being fundamentally dialogic, and only ever alive as it is part of a dialogue, are beautifully evoked by Olive Senior’s description of home as this place of resonance and resonance as ‘sound produced by a body vibrating in sympathy with a neighbouring source of sound’”(37). Her

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<sup>56</sup> Through the protagonist young Lisamarie’s strong resistance to her grade school teacher Robinson suggests an alternative to the way characters’ soundness is undermined as their voices are muffled at the residential school: that an alternative is a renewed “trust in language as a weapon against violence, indeed, the best weapon there is against violence” (Ricoeur 52 “The Poetics”).

description of sound as this embodied response implies that the soundness of a relationship depends on the listening, speech and response that develop between those within this domain. In this illustration, Senior echoes Bakhtin's claim that all utterance produces something new, a dynamic that eschews any sense that the domain of the hearth fire has a ready made, unchangeable shape.

Robinson's portrayal of Josh's role as a predator among the Haisla youth in Kitimaat, (this time, his abuse of Lisamarie's cousin Tab) reinforces the connection this chapter makes between the soundness of relationships and resonance. While Josh's voice is *absorbed* by the invasion of the priest as well as by being overpowered by the residential school system, when he turns on the youth Robinson uses the image of scattering, and cold. As she narrates the story retrospectively, Lisamarie remembers a video she saw "in Geography... about Siberia" where the temperature "drops so far below freezing....[that] as soon as a breath leaves your body, the vapour in it crystallizes, then tinkles as it drifts to the ground. The people there call that sound the music of your soul" (206). This image as well as the title of this section, "The Song of Your Breath," vividly portrays the vibrant delicacy of the resonance foundational to the domain of the hearth fire.

In the same section Lisamarie tells how Tab runs away from her mother Trudy's house in Vancouver and hitchhikes back to Kitimaat. Trudy has "been hammered since [their Uncle] Mick died" and Lisamarie has witnessed how Trudy is oblivious to Tab when she is drinking, leaving Tab with no protection from the

advances the men with whom Trudy is drinking (203). Robinson juxtaposes the “Song of your breath” section with this narrative of how there is no place for Tab’s voice in her home so that she must face the danger that Josh, Trudy’s boyfriend, poses when they are alone.<sup>57</sup> Even before she discovers the card and the black and white photograph that reveal Josh’s residential school experience Lisamarie intuitively senses he is a menace. Ironically, Lisamarie’s parents lecture Tab on the dangers of hitchhiking and when Josh arrives to bring her back to Vancouver, they talk her into going back with him. As Tab soundlessly climbs into his truck “and stared straight ahead,” Josh tells Lisamarie’s parents that “the roads are icy from Prince Rupert to Williams Lake. It’ll take us days to get down” (209),<sup>58</sup> Robinson creates a dread sense of the menace that Tab faces; because of the juxtaposition of these two sections, the reader knows that for Tab to be in Josh’s presence means to be in temperatures “far below freezing” (206). In her portrayal of the systemic racism that the young Josh experiences as well as his means of retaliating, Robinson shows the erasure of the boundaries that act as

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<sup>57</sup> In her essay, “You Can Be So Dense,” Lalage Grauer focuses on the passive role that Robinson attributes to the adults in the community. She speaks of ethical ambiguity of the distance the adults take even when they know Josh is not trustworthy, and asks whether Robinson is questioning what Dr. Clare Brant has identified as a distinctly First Nations practice of justice within their own communities: the ethic of non-interference (Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association conference; October 2007, Calgary, Alberta).

<sup>58</sup> This stretch of road is part of B.C.’s infamous Hwy. 16, described as the Highway of Tears, where in recent years eighteen women have gone missing. “The cruel irony is that it took renewed interest in the fate of the only white woman among the 18 who went missing ... to finally prompt broader questions and revelations about the national tragedy unfolding among Canada’s native women,” notes the Director of Sisters of Spirit, a five-year, federally funded initiative launched in 2005 by the Native Women’s Association of Canada. The group’s research has shown that 520 Canadian aboriginal women have gone missing or been murdered since about 1970. ([www.highwayoftears.ca/News-Oct-09-Dec-09](http://www.highwayoftears.ca/News-Oct-09-Dec-09)).

security along with the resonance that signals the soundness of belonging.

Besides the boundaries that are able to create and/or protect a condition of resonance as they mark the integrity of personal and cultural hearthfires, the hearth fire is also built, as Satya Mohanty claims, through “rememory.” Mohanty argues that trust allows a displaced and exiled people to remember the disorienting past from a safe place:

The cognitive task of ‘rememory’ is dependent on an emotional achievement, on the labor of trusting – oneself, one’s judgments, one’s companions....Trusting enables remembering because it organizes and interprets crucial new information about one’s life: it might be safe, now, to acknowledge one’s feelings; one might be justified in counting on the relative safety of this environment. (Mohanty “Epistemic,” 44,45)

As healthy (personal, familial, cultural) boundaries that mark their young characters’ integrity are invaded and erased, how do Robinson’s, Laurence’s and Niro’s narratives portray their futures so that they are not “uncontrolled repetition” of their pasts (Mohanty 45)? Each text shows the blueprint for a hearth fire as elders and/or ancestors appear to the main characters, or they are remembered for encouraging these characters to trust their own selves. These recalled ancestors or elders are themselves trustworthy and, some offer companionship into the future. The cultural and personal hearth fires are strengthened further as these elders/ancestors recall genealogies that are alternatives to the brutal legacies of the past. Through this recall and as they are gathered into the company of memorable

communities, the narrators Shanna (Niro's *It Starts*), Lisamarie (*Monkey Beach*) and Morag (*Diviners*) are each provided a "place to stand." Within the context of these communities "it might be safe, now, to acknowledge one's feelings; one might be justified in counting on the relative safety of this environment" (Mohanty 45).

In her portrayal of Lisamarie's relationships with her Uncle Mick and her grandmother Ma-ma-oo, Robinson creates a safe place where Lisamarie's trust can grow and be renewed. The end of the novel marks the end of Lisamarie's own quest for her missing brother as she is drawn into the world of the dead through oppressive spirits. Barely alive, as she recalls Mick and Ma-ma-oo she can hear their voices telling her that she has been lured too far, and must go back; Mohanty argument that "memory is a collective" is borne out in this scene as together their "collective effort produces something new: the fusion of [their] voices leads to possibilities that could not have been created" only through Lisamarie's efforts as an individual (Mohanty "Epistemic," 49). Mohanty suggests that in collective recall a transition can take place between the "survival mode of being colonized and the moral agency involved in the subjectivity of being human" ("Postcolonial," 218). As she recalls her relationship with Mick and Ma-ma-oo, she is given strength to resist the pull into the world of the dead and the continuum of past-present-future opens up for her through these relationships.

In Shelley Niro's *It Starts with a Whisper* the protagonist also moves from survival mode to moral agency through the collective effort of a memorable



community. The opening scene shows a lone Shanna recalling the names of the First Nations lost through European invasion, settlement and colonization:

...“Tutelo, Nanticoke, Tobacco, Neutral...” as a fire is slowly smothered. She walks along the Grand River in traditional clothing mourning their loss and in the wake of such a legacy cannot imagine how her own future can be anything but “uncontrolled repetition” of this past. In the next scene Niro springs her from her isolation and silence into the company of the three “Matriarchal Aunts” who magically appear in a car, in technicolour against the bleak cityscape of concrete, where she has been walking home from work. Their “whisper” - that she belongs with them - is a loud stage whisper. Dressed as they are in campy clothes, including rhinestone eyeglasses and lurid, bright colours, these fantastical full-bodied ancestors have arrived to take her to Niagara Falls for a weekend at a honeymoon suite, which one of the Aunts has won in a Bingo game. They drive to Niagara Falls playing practical jokes on an at first reluctant Shanna, their banter and singing challenging her sense of being trapped in a hopeless legacy. Once in the honeymoon suite (complete with a heart-shaped bed) Shanna’s cultural loneliness is transformed as Niro replays the broken promises and treaties through the cheap touristic kitsch of Niagara Falls Honeymoon Capital of the World, engaging in an act of “rememory” that allows Shanna to reread the past in the company of these magical relations. As she and the Matriarchal Aunts croon their country and western song of First Nations independence, sashaying through the suite, Shanna experiences a context that allows her to turn and to face down the

disorientations and diminishment of racist stereotypes:

You said I was lazy, crazy. Took me away from my kind.

Made me speak in gibberish instead of my language.

But you can't control my mind....I'm surviving, I'm thriving.

I'm doing fine without you.

The fire that is smothered in the first scene, that signifies Shanna's mourning and cultural loss of her people's hearth fire, turns into fireworks in the final scene as the Aunts and Shanna end their celebration of "surviving ... thriving" at the Falls. Here, at quarter to twelve, 31 December 1992, on the quincentenary of Columbus's first mistake of assuming the Caribs native to the islands of the Caribbean Sea were Indians, Niro fulfills her desire to get in "the last word" (Ryan 247). And it is here that Shanna becomes aware that as these memorable Matriarchal Aunts surround her "their collective effort produces something new" (Mohanty 49).

Margaret Laurence also creates a resonant domain through the comic/tragic character of Christie whose recall of ancestors help the young Morag stand fast against the isolation she and her foster parents experience because they live in an area the town of Manawaka has designated as the "other side of the tracks," a street "dedicated to flops, washouts and general no-goods" (28). Even as a preschool aged child, Morag knows that the town has put her, Christie and Prin, who have adopted her, 'in their place.' As she walks to face her first day at school in her sack-like dress pieced haphazardly together by Prin, she

apprehensively asks: “Do I have to [attend], Christie?” Knowing what she is about to face, and not able to protect her from the force of the town’s disdain, he coaches her to be fierce, to “Just give them hell, Morag, and you’ll be fine....They’re only muck the same as any of us. Skin and bone and the odd bit of guts....Gabby little turds” (30-31).

Christie provides the young Morag a place among brave ancestors as he recalls Morag’s namesake and ancestor: Piper Gunn’s woman Morag was “a strapping strong woman” who had “the courage of a falcon, and the beauty of a deer and the warmth of a home and the faith of saints” (85, 368). Much later, Morag comes to recognize that she was “born” through Christie’s tales that bring this ancestor and Piper to life. His fierce hope for her well being resonates through Christie’s robust cadence, which carries for Morag “the warmth of a home.” It is similar to the hopeful desire that propelled Piper and Morag Gunn to lead the displaced Scots people when they were left stranded and completely demoralized at the wrong location in a new land. Soon after Christie first introduces her to these ancestors Morag returns to their memory for strength. She has seen Christie’s own “clay feet”; while he shakes with shell shock from his experience of World War I at the kitchen table downstairs, the fearful nine-year old lies in bed mentally composing her own first rendition of that mythical and memorable community. She recalls her new ancestor Morag’s courage: this one who was never afraid of anything in this whole wide world. Never. If they come to a forest, would this Morag there be scared? Not on your christly life. She

would only laugh and say, Forests cannot hurt me because I have the power and the second sight and the good eye and the strength of conviction. (52)

The young Morag takes up the raw material that Christie has provided her and begins to build on it.

In her portrayal of the ancestral hearth fire that Christie creates for Morag through the mythic figure of the other Morag Gunn, Laurence does not idealize this alternative genealogy. She also disallows a simplistic demarcation between Christie and the townspeople, showing how neither Christie nor Morag is immune to the pervasive story that displaces the Métis Tonnerre family as well as their history in the area. Morag absorbs prejudice both overtly and through osmosis in town, at her school *as well as* through the beloved myths she has heard at home. When in school she notices that “Skinner [Jules] ....is not singing ‘The Maple Leaf Forever,’” she at first easily dismisses him: “He comes from nowhere. He isn’t anybody” (Laurence 70).

However, Jules’s refusal to sing begins a shift in her. Driven by his silence, Morag questions Christie about the Scottish settler relationships with the Métis and First Nations, and something contradictory enters the epic story of Piper and Morag Gunn: “Morag: Did they fight the halfbreeds and Indians Christie? Christie: Did they ever. Slew them in their dozens, girl. In their scores.” (86).<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> M. M. Bakhtin’s description of the way individuals and cultures are represented in the “highly distanced genres” of epic and folklore is a fitting portrayal of the way Christie represents Piper and Morag Gunn and the ones that they “slew in their dozens.” This representation locks both sides in an “absolute past and ... distanced image” and represents

Christie's mythmaking, while it gives the young Morag a *space* in which to move around and create meaning, is not true to the history of settler/Métis relationships.

In this chapter's construction of an architecture of belonging that emphasizes a constant unfolding at its hearth fire, the mythical place given to the Métis is "hopelessly readymade." This ready-madeness changes however, when Morag questions the flourish of the rhetoric with its predetermined fatefulness. "Morag: Were they bad, the breeds and them? Christie: Bad? He repeats the word as though he is trying to think what it means" (86). Morag stops Christie with her question of why the Métis and First Nations were fought and slain. And Christie's response highlights the amorality of the "ethnic cleansing" that is a submerged part of the story of Canada's nation-building: "'No,' he says at last. 'They weren't bad. They were – just there'" (86). They were "just there," contrary to the myth that portrays all newcomer arrivals on a vast land, empty of humans who might have stories of their own to live by and with whom life would be more complicated since it would call for negotiation.<sup>60</sup>

While Laurence explores the tensions that Christie's myth-making continues to help create, Eden Robinson also confronts and questions an entrenched myth that continues to affect settler/First Nations relationships.

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them as having a "fully finished and completed being....[that is] *hopelessly ready-made*....[in] a predetermined fate and predetermined position" ("Epic and Novel." *Dialogic Imagination* 34).

<sup>60</sup> This myth continues to erase the historic presence of First Nations and the Métis. During the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver, the Hudson's Bay Company, a sponsor, ran an advertisement that connected the heroics of Olympic athletes to the 'tremendous capacity' of its first employees who "singlehandedly" faced and learned to survive "against all odds" the harsh climate conditions of this "new" land. This portrayal perpetuates the myth of a land empty of First Nations, who moreover taught these Hudson Bay people how to survive.

Robinson plays with the simplistic dialectic that equates only past Haisla tradition with cultural authenticity, a tradition that can be neatly separated from the present especially in the complex character of Ma-ma-oo. On one hand, she enjoys a sophisticated relationship with the land around Kitimaat Village and, on the other, regularly has one-sided shouting matches with “her” community of soap opera characters. Robinson also challenges an implicit binary opposition between Western modernity and Haisla tradition by creating an adolescent narrator who is named after Elvis Presley’s daughter. The alternative genealogies that Robinson depicts and that includes Elvis, does not conform to a notion of “pure” tradition as if, for example, Turtle Island were not a complex trading network that included cultural exchange long before Europeans arrived. The cultural hearth fire that gives strength to Lisamarie is complex, where a media-driven popular culture weaves through the long history of Haisla life in this specific location. The domain of the hearth fire that provides the security in which characters can again learn to trust themselves, trust their judgments as well as trust their companions, is one of contradictions and paradox rather than one abstracted and insulated from contemporary cultural dynamics. These scattered characters that are gathered into alternative communities by memorable elders can be sure that their own unfolding into the future will be as richly complex as this company is.

Besides providing a safe place where dominant myths can be questioned, it is within the domain of the hearth fire that the monologue of stereotypes can be taken up and cultural icons animated. Shelley Niro takes iconic and stereotypical

figures and replays them so that they are more connected to the heart or hearth fire of Haudenosaunee culture. As she complicates them, they take their place in the dense interiority of her culture.

In the final two movements of *Suite: INDIAN* - “Dance of the Canoe Pants” and “The Red Army is the Strongest” - Niro takes the canoe, the figure of the Indian warrior and the idea of Natives as being “red,” and shakes these up. She disarms their power through exaggeration or by putting them in new contexts. In these two movements the dancers wear “canoe pants” reminiscent of Disney costumes. Made of fabric, the bow and stern of each canoe puffs out behind and in front of the dancer. The Native dancers are Indians “sitting” in their canoes, canoes so small they will only do as pants. In “war paint,” with fake hatchets raised and with canoe pants ballooning behind and in front of them, they keep getting in each other’s way as they move to the oom-pah-pah rhythm of marching band music. In “The Red Army is the Strongest,” the dancers mock-march to the music of the former U.S.S.R.’s Red Army Chorus in a wild juxtaposition of Haudenosaunee clowning<sup>61</sup> and Russian army music that adds another layer to this engagement of the warrior stereotype. Even as this Chorus’ music was used to lift the spirits of the flagging armies on the Russian front Niro calls her own “red army” to be strong on what are still “front lines.”

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<sup>61</sup> Niro’s set of strategies as she creates thresholds between Native and non-Native communities and cultures, is a complex one. As she challenges stereotypical images that stifle meaningful dialogue, the “punchlines” of Niro’s jokes have “teeth.” In her focus on the ongoing devastation of Native communities, Niro realizes that her work has the potential of “turning a lot of people off, and so,” she says, “you have to bring them a little bit closer to make them want to listen. I think that is where humour comes in. It pulls them in a little bit and gets them to wait for the punchline” (“A Time”).

These dances also challenge the warrior image. The ubiquitous image of the masked Mohawk warrior obscured the leadership that Kanehsatake women gave in the Oka struggle since it was in fact the clan mothers, not warriors, who decided it was time to stand their ground as their land was threatened, at Oka, Quebec in 1990. As tanks and tear gas and other weapons of intimidation surrounded them, these women led the Mohawk presence on the front lines, because the rifles aimed at them made them “more mad than afraid” (Obomsawin, *Kanehsatake*). Ellen Gabriel, one of the clan mothers, explains that in the Mohawk language “warrior” signifies “one who bears the burden of peace” (Welsh). While the image of the warrior at Oka is framed to denote leadership in the throes of a constant power struggle where one seeks to lord it over another, the figure of the matriarch (i.e. the Matriarchal Aunts in *It Starts*) suggests a desire for peace based on justice, a peace within which a people have the opportunity to flourish.

By creating various “Matriarchs” (i.e. Niro’s photographic series “Mohawks in Beehives”) Niro counters the hollowness of spectacular images with one that suggests that the distance between the domestic and the public is minimal. Niro’s portrayal of domesticity shows a welcome alternative to the woman in the 1950s kitchen: that precursor of a continuing view that this sphere is always and only confining. In a photograph whose title plays on anthropological language “The Iroquois is a Highly Developed Matriarchal Society,” for example, Niro features her mother under a hairdryer in her sister’s kitchen. This title, she notes, “sounds so serious, and I sometimes think some people start believing these



things they hear and...that they have to be so stiff. It *is* a matriarchal society, but you can loosen it up a bit too. And it comes from your mum” (qtd. in Ryan 66).

Niro imagines a Mohawk nationhood guarded by women who make their protective role flexible rather than aggressive or fixed. In contrast to the individualistic materialism with the patronizing undertones that framed home and domesticity as keeping women “in their place,” a place of no consequence, the people of the longhouse look to women and to their role in child rearing as a foundational one that has consequences for the entire community. The women choose who will stand in male leadership positions, since, according to Haudenosaunee logic they have access to these children from the time they are born so that as they watch over them as they grow, they have ample opportunity to notice the potential for leadership in a particular child.

Although Haudenosaunee nationhood is signified by specifically iconic belongings such as the moccasins and the beadwork headdress that are exquisitely crafted in an early movement of *Suite: INDIAN*, Shelley Niro stretches the notion of this nationhood in the following segment “Mars Thunderchild Gets a Calling.” While Mars Thunderchild sleeps, the camera moves around her room to reveal a setting dominated by images from pop culture so that Thunderchild’s photo of Sitting Bull beside the moccasins and headdress seems to have the status of memorabilia. Niro recodes these objects not in terms of nostalgic imitation but in terms of Sitting Bull’s challenge to Thunderchild that her vision is blurring. Niro replays Sitting Bull, one of the most widely known historical figures (along with,

for instance, Geronimo) in pop culture, so that Sitting Bull, a Lakota, becomes Niro's choice over less widely known Haudenosaunee leaders such as Levi General (Deskaheh), who went to the League of Nations in 1923 to appeal for Six Nations recognition as an independent nation. In choosing a pop culture figure of Native authenticity/leadership/ resistance, Niro animates this "framed trophy" into a living, vital figure who comes calling first over the telephone, then as he knocks at her door. He meets her playful reference to him as "S.B." or "Mr. Bull" by challenging her to return to the values of Haudenosaunee culture, as a vital alternative within a contemporary context. In this segment of *Suite: INDIAN* Niro asks what its foundational story has to offer to those who experience the many estrangements pervasive in consumer culture.

### **Founding Stories and The Shape of Haudenosaunee Belonging**

The founding story of the Iroquois Confederacy is a part of the cultural fire that gathers Haudenosaunee people, a story that Shelley Niro retraces and strengthens through much of her work.<sup>62</sup> In the opening scenes of both *It Starts With a Whisper* and *Suite: INDIAN* she catches the movement and sound of fire and these images evoke the reality of the Haudenosaunee fire that has literally been kept burning in Ontario since 1784 when the Six Nations first came to live

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<sup>62</sup> *Kissed by Lightning*, which premiered at the November 2009 ImagiNative Film Festival in Toronto, takes up the theme of condolence as it weaves the story of Hiawatha's healing and the peace that is slowly forged between the Five Nations through a contemporary story of desolation, mourning and regeneration.

along the Grand River in a nation-to-nation relationship with the British. A shadow cast by interior fire on the hide wall of a lodge in *Suite: INDIAN's* opening scene sets the context for the story of the consolation that shaped the founding of the Six Nations. The Peacemaker comforts Hiawatha after finding him in self-imposed exile, mourning the death of his two daughters. As he wipes away Hiawatha's tears and touches Hiawatha's wampum (beads) to his forehead a voice-over explains that "Haudenosaunee life began in the need for creativity." Niro makes a vital connection between consolation and the creativity that opens up options for peace making in the face of pain, hatred and bitterness. In this opening scene Niro recalls the Peacemaker's "offer to pull from the older man the grief which had frozen his thinking and plunged him into despair" so that through carefully listening to and addressing Hiawatha's grief, eventually the Peacemaker "brings Hiawatha...to a place of hope" (Mohawk xviii).<sup>63</sup>

Taiaiake Alfred<sup>64</sup> understands the primary importance of this condolence for establishing good governance because when people are in pain "they can't see properly; they can't hear; and they don't speak the truth. Something serious has happened to them, and the challenge for the strong-minded, the peace-makers, is to....give them something that will make them capable of seeing, hearing, and

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<sup>63</sup> This encounter "provides the model for the condolence practices in the installation of leaders and provides some of the process by which peace treaties were to be conducted in this part of the world for a long time" (Mohawk xviii). In *Peace, Power and Righteousness*, Taiaiake Alfred shows how this founding relationship remains vital to Haudenosaunee governance and how the practice of the condolence ceremony is a gift that the Confederacy is able to offer other cultures whose political models do not take reconciliation into account.

<sup>64</sup> Professor Alfred is Mohawk from Kahnawake and founding Director of the University of Victoria's School of Indigenous Governance. *Kanien'kehaka* [gun-ya-geh-haw-ga] or "Mohawk" literally means "people of the flint" (Alfred, *Wasáse* 287).

speaking their way back to peace” (Alfred, *Peace* 18). Consolation and creativity are closely linked both domestically and in the public square. Through the condolence that the Peacemaker brings a way is opened for peace not only within Hiawatha but also between enemies, if Hiawatha “can set aside [the] hatred and revenge” that fill him after those two killings (Alfred, *Peace* 129). Niro’s films introduce and revisit this vital part of the larger story of the Six Nations: how Hiawatha and the Peacemaker work to help five<sup>65</sup> warring First Nations slowly form a strong alliance, one which becomes the “oldest continuously running democratic government in the world” (Coleman, “Imposing”).<sup>66</sup> The constant action of peace-making that grounds this particular democracy provides a dynamic legacy to contemporary generations of Haudenosaunee who need sustenance in the continuing struggle to complicate the assimilating actions of the Canadian state. This founding story testifies to the inner strength that was forged in the resolve of the five nations to work together towards unity: the desire to solve problems through diplomacy, good words, good-mindedness (Monture). As Niro’s work repeatedly engages these aspects of the Confederacy’s founding story it increases the symbolic power of the Haudenosaunee hearth fire, a place that gathers and strengthens the people as it burns beyond other stories that dominate.

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<sup>65</sup> The Tuscaroras joined the original The Five Nations—Onondaga, Mohawks, Oneidas, Cayugas, and Senecas—to make up the Six Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy.

<sup>66</sup> In recalling the Peacemaker’s role as he attends Hiawatha in his grief and despair, bringing him “eventually to a place of hope,” the Peacemaker “defined righteousness as the result of the best thinking of collective minds operating from principles which assume that a sane world requires that we provide a safe environment for our children seven generations into the future” (Wallace xx).

## **Conclusion: Approaching the Domain of the Threshold**

In the context of this dissertation's focus on the relationship between stories and home-making away from home, the above discussion traces how belonging is enacted in stories that function as a cultural and personal hearth fire. As these stories work both within oppressive boundaries and at their edges, belonging is manifested through relationships within which characters can begin to trust themselves and others, trust that they are in a safe place, trust the unfolding and thriving that is encouraged here through ancestors or elders. Each text suggests that for its young characters keeping the hearth fire alive is an ongoing process. Laurence's *Diviners* ends with Morag's and Jules's daughter Pique leaving Morag's home to continue the rememory work that her wandering father Jules had begun. Lisamarie, in the final scene of *Monkey Beach*, struggles to stay afloat by recalling the strength, safety and trust that was generated through her relationship with Ma-ma-oo and Uncle Mick. And in recognition of her work of providing a window into Haudenosaunee culture, Mohawk film maker Shelley Niro is named among those who "stir the cultural fire." The domain of the threshold, which the next chapter will explore (although not in architectural terms), depends on this rebuilding of hearth fires where scattered people can gather, and where trust can be regained.

The dialogue so important to belonging in the domain of the hearth fire is also essential to the exchanges that characterize the domain of the threshold, an exchange that inevitably is shaped by how each community interprets the

differences between them. One of the functions of this domain is to get beyond the dominant voice of an empire which denies “the existence outside [itself] of another .... [whose] monologue is finalized and deaf to the other’s response, does not expect it and does not acknowledge in it any decisive force” (Bakhtin *Problems Dostoevsky* 292-293). The domain of the threshold is shaped by the desire for open-endedness that marks true dialogue, and this chapter’s discussion will conclude by tracing this desire in Shelley Niro’s segment “Home,” as well as in Margaret Laurence’s portrayal of the “nuisance grounds” on the edge of the town of Manawaka.

In “Home” (a segment of *Suite: INDIAN*), Niro follows a homeless young Haudenosaunee woman for a day in Brantford and highlights the tension of “the painful paradox of living in a town named after a Mohawk [Joseph Brant] where contemporary Haudenosaunee ‘feel that they are the intruders and quietly exist, never really claiming the identity that made it possible for others to share the space’” (Niro qtd in Higginson 179). The main character’s *Chicago Black Hawks* hockey shirt itself signals the history of symbolic appropriations as this hockey team takes the name of the Black Hawk peoples who were driven from the area now known as Illinois, in the three short years (1845-1848) that the American state doubled its territory by claiming First Nations’ land as its own. This dominant story pervades Niro’s “Home” as she sets most of the scenes in central park of Brantford, where the main character and her friends sleep in the shadow of a monumental statue of Joseph Brant; this monumentalism is ironic since, even



during Brant's lifetime, he protested that the lands promised to the Six Nations by the British were being whittled away.<sup>67</sup>

Niro nevertheless creates an architecture of belonging in the park's open space. Recalling the central role of the fire-keeper at the cultural heart of the Iroquois Confederacy, the Haudenosaunee woman returns to her companions in the park carrying a flame at the end of the day, in the dark. In reference to this scene Niro asks, "Do we care for one another?" repeating the same question that marked the beginning of this alliance; except here she is asking it in the context of a consumer culture:

I see the foundation [of the Confederacy] as being made up of individuals weakened by sickness and disease. Survivors...had to know their limits and realize that if they were to thrive in the face of adversity they had to join forces and help each other in that fight. That is where the strength of community lies—coming together, giving thanks, contributing—that is the seed that holds people together. Otherwise people starve [as they]...just focus on things. (Niro, "Guest Lecture").

The flame the young woman carries to her friends provides a circle of light and warmth and recalls this seed that "holds people together." The flame marks its own domain of welcome within this oppressive place. In the final minute of this scene Niro's camera focuses on the light of another circle – the full moon -

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<sup>67</sup>This struggle continues today as the federal and provincial Canadian governments continue to stall the many land claims that are in the courts over the six miles on either side of the Grand River from its source to Lake Erie that was part of the agreement between the Haudenosaunee and British allies. This stalling is one source of the current tension over land in Caledonia.

suggesting a broader sphere that includes the ecological household and a sense of the Creator that is central to belonging for many Indigenous peoples. Its light in the final scene seems to breathe peace over the homeless Six Nations young people, suggesting that as they continue to witness land appropriations that must be addressed, they have a home under this moon. And so the hearth fires signified by the flame carrier and the moon reveal the need for a threshold: that place where long-standing treaty agreements wait to be negotiated, where a new civility can be forged between neighbouring peoples, peoples who “are all here to stay.”<sup>68</sup>

While Niro creates this “window,” Margaret Laurence describes for her own settler community what might be needed in the domain of the threshold. Christie’s answer to Morag, when she catches the rhetorical flourish of his “slew them by the dozens” shows how this myth continues to close a door to the legitimate place of Métis people within the public square. Through questioning of ready made assumptions a “new project of civility [is] under negotiation” (Coleman *White* 9). Laurence’s portrayal also suggests that this civility “assumes proximity” since it is Morag’s *encounter* with Jules that makes her connect the “them” in “slew them”

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<sup>68</sup> The Rt. Hon. Antonio Lamer, Chief Justice Supreme Court of Canada. *Delgamuukw VS The Queen*, 11 December 1997 “In the landmark *Delgamuukw* decision, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that aboriginal title exists in British Columbia and set out the test for proof of that title.....Finally, the Chief Justice encourages the parties to resolve these matters through negotiated settlements and not in court.” *Aboriginal Law Bulletin*. “1998-04 *Delgamuukw*: We are all here to stay.” [www.davis.ca/publication](http://www.davis.ca/publication) 10 Dec. 2009. Web. This ruling was also a landmark as it gave courts the mandate to weigh oral history as evidence equally important as written history.



to Jules' own descendents (Walsh et al 257).

In this scene Laurence finds a way to articulate “the white supremacy embedded in a real project of civility” (Coleman *White* 9). As he traces “white civility” in popular literary Canadian history, Daniel Coleman demonstrates the need for ambiguity in places such as this, where Christie stands in relation to the myths he tells Morag and in relation to the town. It is at sites of these kind that new projects of civility are under negotiation. The purpose of looking at how the borders were drawn, challenged, and renegotiated...[is to] allow ourselves to be ‘read by’ the past, to remind ourselves that the margins of our own understandings of civility are often just as violent and exclusive as they were in past generations, though the specific categories of exclusion and their rationalizations may have shifted. (Coleman 9-10)

In the pause that Morag's question creates in Christie's train of assumptions, Laurence begins to trace an opening. This is an acknowledgement that his recitation of the events that include “the Troubles” between the Métis settlements and Canadian nation-building must be open to *reinterpretation*: one of the main dynamics of the domain of the threshold.

This domain, also created by Niro's ‘windows’ on Haudenosaunee culture, by Laurence's construction of places such as the nuisance grounds, is crucial for building “a culture of connectivity,” for “interrelationships in which civility can flourish” (Coleman 10). As Morag rides beside Christie on her first trip to the nuisance grounds, he nods to the houses they pass: “some of them, because I take

off their muck for them, they think I'm muck. Well, I *am* muck, but so are they. Not a father's son, not a man born or woman who is not muck in some part of his immortal soul girl. That's what they don't know, the poor sods. *When I carry away their refuse, I'm carrying off part of them, do you see?*" (71 emphasis added).<sup>69</sup> Although the town dump is on the physical and emotional periphery of the town, the heart of the town is revealed there. Christie divines the many fragments that signify how the townspeople themselves are divided despite the "facework" behind which they hide the "muck" of these divisions. At the same time Christie is aware of the inadequacies hidden in his own person: how he cannot bring himself to intervene when his neighbour Winkler habitually beats his children. In Christie, Laurence creates a diviner whose reading of the town's garbage suggests that exile can be found not only in the hearts of the town's "who's who," but also in his own. His acute awareness, Laurence suggests, is important for a person, or a people approaching a threshold where they will meet with another.

Christie's divining at the nuisance grounds creates the conditions for a threshold also in that he does not try to reconcile the mix revealed there of truth and lies, malevolence and care, but exclaims: "Oh what a piece of work is man oh what a bloody awful piece of work is man enough to scare the pants off you when you come to think of it *the opposite is also true* hm hm" (88 emphasis

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<sup>69</sup> Through his clownish declaration that "By their *garbage* shall ye know them," Laurence sets Christie up as something of a biblical prophet, in the tradition of prophesying not as much about the future as exposing the truth of the particular hypocrisies of the powers-that-be (39).

added). The contradictions that Christie finds here and in himself creates a strong humility in him so that the “bloody awfulness” that he sees does not “scare the pants off” of him because he also sees something of the divine in this “piece of work” that is humankind. Because the truth includes both, he does not use the awfulness that he uncovers to expose or to blackmail the townspeople, nor does he add to the shame of those who have been estranged, or to the hidden shame of those who enjoy status and respect. In Christie’s fierce reading at the nuisance grounds Laurence portrays a threshold where the clean lines of the town’s regulating order are diffused.

The creation of a threshold includes apprenticeship and Jules and Morag comprise the audience here as Christie unearths some of the town’s suppressed stories. In fact, Christie’s reading of the divisions that criss-cross the town’s seeming coherence opens a space where Jules and Morag *can* meet, and, it is here, where the townspeople discard the parts of themselves that do not fit, that Jules and Morag first begin to exchange their own conflicting stories.<sup>70</sup> It is within this domain that Jules and Morag begin a relationship marked by all the contradictions and paradoxes that are implicit within the pressures of the historically unequal relation between First Nations, Métis and settler communities.

In their first tentative meeting Jules challenges Morag’s assertion

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<sup>70</sup> In *If This is Your Land, Where Are Your Stories: Finding Common Ground*, J. Edward Chamberlin suggests that neighbouring communities each have their own stories to tell, and that this sharing of stories is what creates “common ground.” Neil ten Kortenaar responds to Chamberlin by asking if all stories are the same *kind* of story and, the importance of noting the differences between stories. He also asks whether the ground where these stories are shared *is* a level playing field.

that he “comes from nowhere” by referring to the stories that Lazarus has passed on to him of his grandfather, and an ancestor named Rider Tonnerre who were both part of the Métis struggle to establish their voice during the nation-building of the 1880s.

Morag: My family is named Gunn, see? And you better not forget it....I’m related to Piper Gunn, so there....he led his people onto the ships when they were...poor because ... the Bitch-Duchess took them...and they were scared, leaving there, but then Piper Gunn played the pipes and put the heart back into them.

Jules: My granddad, he built the first of our place....He come back from the Troubles [where] ....they never shot his balls off....they couldn’t, because he was a better shot than them soldiers. I can shoot pretty good, too. I got his name, see?....I tell you one t’ing, though. Long time before my granddad, there’s one Tonnerre they call Chevalier, and no man can ride like him, and he is one helluva shot. My grandad, he tol’ my dad about that guy, there. (73-74)

In this exchange Laurence puts their stories side-by-side, descendants of a refugee people and the Métis, and she allows the tremendous tension that rises between them. In our introduction to *Countering Displacements: Creativity and Agency*, Coleman, Goheen, Hasan and I point to how the “the figures of the native and the refugee are inherently bound to one another” even though “strong political, social and disciplinary investments...keep the discussion of these two displaced

populations in separate...accounts” (3). Laurence’s narrative traces this “complicated reality whose tensions include the right of land and the right of migration,” and in this scene she uncovers how the refugee Gunns became part of the nationalist movement that was “aggressively displacing people indigenous to this place” (3). “The Troubles” that Jules refers to is the 1885 resistance led by Louis Riel against Canadian attempts to appropriate land for Protestant settlers around the Red River, and to assimilate the Métis. Laurence maintains the tensions of this encounter as she portrays the erratic nature of their relationship; Jules, for example, first meets his daughter Pique when he stays with Morag in Vancouver. He is here to look after his sister who is mourning over the presumed murder of a younger brother whom she has raised. Paul, an accomplished canoeist, does not return from guiding two white Americans on a hunting trip and the police are ambivalent about their claim that he drowned. There is no investigation. Jules reminds Morag she cannot know, share, or attempt to fix the grief and the tension of this legacy of treating Métis people as second-class citizens.

In her portrayal of the final visit between Jules, Morag and the now fifteen-year-old Pique, Laurence engages the work that this chapter has associated with building an architecture of belonging. There is the sense that Pique is finally receiving some of her inheritance as through his songs Jules passes on to her stories about those who had belonged to him and whom he has lost. These songs do the work of rememory as they lament her ancestral namesake Piquette’s death in the fire and highlight her grandfather Lazarus’s determination not to give in to

the tide of grief, disdain and misery that has surged around him throughout his life. These musical narratives also act as a bridge between Lazarus and Pique. Jules creates and builds a resonance between Pique's past and her future by conveying to her that this inheritance is part of his fierce hope and determination that she and he continue by sharing Lazarus's will to live (425). When Jules and Morag meet in his rooming house as Jules is dying of throat cancer she lets Jules know that Pique has inherited his gift of song writing and brings Jules the lyrics of Pique's first song. It is their songs that will carry Pique as she makes plans to leave her home with Morag and visit Jules's brother Jacques on his farm for the first time.

The risks that both Jules and Morag take in their attempt to build trust between them, the hope that Jules and Morag carry for Pique, and, the songs that Jules passes on to her, and which she will continue: these are all ways of 'partaking' in mystery. Laurence, Niro, and Robinson each portray how their characters come to sense they belong and they begin to take "ownership of" their "freed selves." In this they gesture towards the domain of the threshold: where former (historical and political) enemies stand and face one another. It is a complicated and tenuous place, *especially* as it is founded on the "insubstantial": the human longing for restoration.



## **Chapter Three: Home-making Mystery in Estranging Mastery: Rumours of a Larger Story**

Chapter Two asked how Laurence, Niro and Robinson shaped an architecture of belonging where their alienated characters and scattered communities could be gathered in so that they can “own their freed selves.” Alternatives to a hopelessly colonized identity come to their characters through myth, through introduction to a memorable community, through rememory and a reconfiguring of genealogy. Yet, in these experiences of belonging they are not isolated from practices of mastery that continue to be forces of power-over. Nor are they cloistered away from empire stories that try to contain or dissolve through assimilation, any thing or culture that does not comply with this story’s imperial domain or the meanings and identities that it determines within its framework.

The legacy of Canadian federal attempts to maintain a “power-over” relationship with First Nations continues, and this chapter reads this relationship in terms of a mastery that means to erase difference and to assimilate another culture; this mastery estranges another. This estrangement is manifested in ongoing threats to Native cultures and way of life. There are alternatives to this estrangement, evidenced by what this chapter understands as an acceptance of the mystery that difference signifies, and, practices that create room for this difference. One of the first signs of difference is speech: the use of different languages. When cultures meet, their different ways of knowing, articulated

through their language, evokes the mystery that each culture is another voice – important and distinct - in a larger story. When these differences are acknowledged and honoured, not seen as a threat, the power of this mystery is exercised. For example, in a ruling that broadened conditions for hearing land claims cases in the Canadian federal court system, Chief Justice Antonio Lamer concluded by saying, “We are all here to stay.” The ruling acknowledged that western ways of giving testimony are not sufficient for expressing First Nations ways of knowing and experience of, for example, the land; this ruling then, opens the door for language that does convey this knowledge and experience, acknowledging the importance of these ways of knowing. And so, the power of the mystery that different ways of knowing and languages opens up in human relations is acknowledged in this ruling.

While a sense of this mystery is necessary for people of different cultures and ways of life to be able to share this land, mystery is also evoked in conciliation. In the face of the strong currents that try to override difference, it is remarkable, for example, that the *Aboriginal Law Bulletin* cites Justice Lamer’s conclusion, that the *Bulletin* editors even allow for a “we” who are “all here to stay.” This chapter asks: what might give “us” the power to “stay”? How can this power to stay be described; what characterizes the kind of power that is needed to turn the tide of mastery, of power-over approaches and appropriations? What would be included in “staying power” that “steadies, supports, sustains”?<sup>71</sup> If

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<sup>71</sup> Stay: 1. Something that supports or steadies, sustains something else. (3030;872);



“stay” once meant an “object of reliance,” how could one culture be that for another; how might this be imagined, for example, in the fictional texts that this thesis reads? ...

Unless there is staying power, the different peoples who live amongst one another in this land, cannot truly share it in a just way. And so, this chapter’s exploration of the connection between staying power and mystery will be framed by especially the following quotations. Both explore an open-endedness that this chapter argues is an important characteristic of a sense of, the experience of and/or a posture of mystery. While James Olthuis speaks of open-endedness that is necessary for the meeting of difference, Flannery O’Connor associates the experience of mystery with trust beyond oneself and gestures towards the idea of mystery as a sense of being a part of a larger story, which this chapter will later develop through Cree theologian Ray Aldred’s thoughts.

If “we are all here to stay,” then how people of different cultures approach one another, what they base their interpretations of each other on, is crucial. Olthuis takes up the exercise of interpretation in important ways as he writes:

If human life means to be gifted with connections and called to (re)connections, then hermeneutics at its heart needs to be a spiritual exercise which, in interpreting, listening, and seeing, honors, respects, and meets the other... Here the heart-beat of hermeneutics is not mastery of facts...but meeting the other in creative tension towards a creative mutuality

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2. A thing or a person that affords support; an object of reliance. (ibid); 3. A cessation of hostility or dissension. Also a means of reconciliation. (3031; 874); 4. Staying power; power of endurance. To be an anchor for. (ibid); 5. A place of sojourn. (ibid); 6. To remain in a place or in others’ company (3031;875) (*Compact OED Vol II* 1971).

that lets the other be other. Interpretation is...an interconnecting for an intersubjective attunement of justice and healing. ...Such openness to difference is at heart a willingness both to journey-with and to be journeyed-with. (Olthuis 145)

While the power of mastery is revealed in the desire for and the practice of power *over* another, the power of mystery is manifested through mutuality - the willingness to journey-with, a difficult practice filled with tension. However, in the face of the tension of power plays, the fictional writers that this chapter takes up each imagine the possibilities of the “creative tension towards creative mutuality.” The last chapter ended with a discussion of Margaret Laurence’s portrayal of the tension in the relationship between Jules and Morag. This chapter understands that this creative tension that works towards creative mutuality is maintained through the power of mystery, a way of becoming at-home that forms a counternarrative to the mastery of dominant empire stories. Even in their tenuous relationship Morag and Jules are able to sustain one another and through their refusal to let the tensions and the differences between them break their relationship Laurence evokes the mystery that has staying power.

American author Flannery O’Connor asks how the fiction writer who “believes that our life is and will remain essentially mysterious” will portray mystery, and argues that what this writer

sees on the *surface* will be of interest to him only as he can go through it into an experience of mystery itself.... because for this kind of writer, the meaning of a story does not begin except at a depth where adequate

motivation and adequate psychology and the various determinations have been exhausted. Such a writer will be interested in what we *don't* understand rather than in what we do. He will be interested in *possibility* rather than in *probability*. He will be interested in characters who are forced out to meet evil and grace and *who act on a trust beyond themselves* – whether they know very clearly what it is they act upon or not. (O'Connor 41-42 emphasis added)

O'Connor highlights elements of both mastery and mystery that will be developed throughout this chapter: the notion that mystery cannot be found on surfaces; that story gains meaning when probability gives way to possibility; that mastery has to do with predetermining outcomes while mystery has to do with trust that stretches characters beyond what they know.

Unlike the writer of the “who-done-it,” the particular genre that equates mystery with a puzzle that, once solved, is *dissolved*, the mystery that is able to hold the difference between cultures in creative tension only ever deepens. Writers who believe that “our life ... *will remain...* mysterious,” are important to postcolonial readings since they provide counternarratives to colonizing that privileges “unity, totality, identity, closure, and homogeneity... in which the strange is not only to be comprehended, but where all estrangement is to be overcome” (Olthuis 140). Instead of this mastery-over approach to another culture, the meeting between people of different cultures is understood in terms of undetermined possibilities, so that some of the characters act on “a trust beyond

themselves.” Mystery includes the sense that what makes up the integrity of humans cannot be completely comprehended. Linking mystery, knowing and understanding, George Vandeveldē writes: “Mystery evokes a knowledge that entails ‘under-standing,’ a standing *under* and *within* that which one ‘knows’” (6).

### **Mystery sustained through a “looking informed by love.”**

In the face of and in spite of the risk of violence...I begin with an intersubjectivity of non-oppositional difference – an economy of love (eros) – and its yearning for healthy connection, shared power, mutuality and right relation....Eros is the cosmological urge to connection, the full-bodied, multi-dimensional desire to reach out meet and be in contact with others, the beyond, and God. (Olthuis 138)

Truth and love are modes of mystery. Truth and love are facets of the mystery of life in this world. (Vandeveldē 13)

The above quotations develop further the characteristics that are fundamental to what this chapter understands as mystery. An experience of mystery grows through a growing interdependence that is marked by openness to difference and is grounded in truth and love. In the context of how people of different cultures may approach one another truth, rather than being a “mastery of facts” *about* the other, always serves the connections and the spiritual calling for (re)connection. The meeting place between persons or peoples, calls for an openness that is propelled by love that “seeks connection with the different not for

the purpose of fusion or domination but for amazement, meeting, diversity, fecundity, and mutuality” (Olthuis 144). The truth and love that are modes of mystery are manifested in the desire for exchange that seeks the well-being of both persons or cultures.

Poet and philosopher Jan Zwicky’s meditations on truth and love assume that they are not notions abstract from human relations. Rather, they shape a responsiveness, a kind of posture characterized by careful attention:

Truth is the ...limit of sensitive attempts to be responsible to our actual experience of the world. We recognize some gestures as true when we experience the resonant relation they indicate or enact.... ‘Sensitive attempts to be responsible’ means truth is the result of *attention*. (As opposed to inspection.) Of looking informed by love. Of really looking. (Zwicky, *Wisdom & Metaphor* 102).

Zwicky associates truth a resonance between people, a resonance that she says calls for a looking that is “informed by love.” This “really looking” is a radical alternative to “inspection,” a gaze that holds another human (being or culture) in its “grasp.” This looking pays attention not in order to appropriate what one sees, or to impose one’s own image onto another; it is attentive to the otherness of the other person, to the mysterious difference between them. This kind of looking suggests that what one sees is the

beginning of connection based on a respect for the integrity of the other and an interest in undetermined possibilities.<sup>72</sup>

The exchange of looks necessary as people of different cultures meet one another is taken up by scholars in post-colonial studies. In his essay “Imposing subCitizenship” Daniel Coleman explores the dynamic of looking and seeing between persons and cultures as he quotes Spanish schoolteacher and poet Antonio Machado:

The eye you see is not  
An eye because you see it;  
It is an eye because it sees you. (1)

Coleman writes that

Machado doubles the gaze back upon us in this epigram by making the object of our gaze another eye....and reminds me that seeing is interrelational, ... that there are others who can see me and witness my actions. Machado’s reciprocal gaze reminds us that to know ourselves truly in the world, we need ... to perceive ourselves as subjects in relation to other subjects, agents in relation to other agents. (Coleman, “Imposing” 2)

While a hermeneutics of appropriation is manifested through the inspecting eye that is closed to the possibility of an exchange of attentive glances, a

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<sup>72</sup> M. M. Bakhtin’s model of individual’s sense of identity depends on the connection based on a “looking informed by love.” He argues that an “I-for-myself” is not able to stand outside him/her self, and so can never trust a mirror for a view of self that is true because “only one consciousness is at work in an exchange that *requires two*” (Emerson, “Keeping” 112 emphasis added). Rather than “the idea that the ‘gaze’ of another inevitably constitutes a form of violence,” Bakhtin insists that the “I-for-myself” needs another’s view in order to take an active role in the life of the world (Emerson, “Keeping” 112).

hermeneutics of connection acknowledges that the integrity that includes the differences between humans can never be fully grasped. This exchange of looks opens up the mystery of the other, signaling the desire for an open-ended relationship forged through mutuality.

In the context of what this chapter's introduction understands in terms of the connection between becoming at-home and mystery, how do Wiebe, Robinson and Niro portray the determinisms that squeeze out the mystery of difference between characters and cultures? How do the texts take characters beyond the determinations of a dominant story? How do they evoke experiences of mystery that wedge open a place for a person or a people to breathe again? What characterizes the mystery that creates room for difference and that contributes to the characters' or their communities' being-at-home? Where is the "power to stay" at work in Robinson's, Niro's and Wiebe's texts?

### **Power-over: definitions and practices of mastery**

In "Otherwise Than Violence," James Olthuis links how one interprets one's place in the world to the way one approaches others. He refers to the longstanding traditional use of a "modernist hermeneutic model" as a "mastery model" that, when practiced ends in violent disconnection. The one who interprets the life of other peoples using this model "turns his/her desire to the text and appropriates it to further his/her autonomy, to guarantee his/her power with respect to the appropriated, making its power into his/her own" (147). His description of this dominant approach as a "kind of guerilla warfare in which you endeavor to raid

the text for treasure and escape” also aptly describes the practice of European political powers in Turtle Island/North America. It is important to follow the path of an interpretive mastery model to see how seemingly insubstantial “ideas” shape the way one culture meets differences in another. This chapter suggests that this “hermeneutic model” that privileges mastery as power-over is the ground for a deeply entrenched *practice* that furthers the plot of an empire story whose force continues to be felt in a people’s everyday life.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the sense of mastery that echoes through these practices as “domination or subjugation ....superior force or power....dominion, control...predominance.”<sup>73</sup> The effect has been a rupturing and disconnecting of multi-layered relationships that have characterized First Nations identities with the land. The following examples of the practice of a power-over mastery, while providing contexts for earlier discussions of the way dominion and control are portrayed in the fictional narratives, manifest the ruptures that have taken place in the last fifty to sixty years, and which continue.<sup>74</sup> Furthermore, since the ideas that shape a mastery mode of interpretation are so

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<sup>73</sup> Mastery 1.a. Superiority or ascendancy in battle or competition, or in a struggle of any kind; victory resulting in domination or subjugation; an instance of this, a victory. b. Superior force or power. to have to mastery: to have in one's power. 2. a. More generally: the state or condition of being master, controller, or ruler; authority, dominion, control; an instance of this. b. Predominance; prevailing or predominant character.

<sup>74</sup> Kate Higginson notes “the ways in which colonial practices continue anew in many locations which are nominally ‘post-colonial’ or chronologically beyond colonization”; her use of the term “neo-colonial” signals her “accord with the vast majority of Indigenous scholars who reject ‘post-colonialism’ as a descriptor of our contemporary period and insist the colonial period is far from over” (*Caught Up* 9).



often the invisible forces that shape practice, in these examples I have attempted to demonstrate how closely aligned they actually are.

A valorization of and pride in pragmatic knowledge by industry led to the violent disconnection of Haisla and T'en Cheslatta communities from the way of life that they had developed on the land and sea, in British Columbia in the 1950s (Chapter One). The planning and building of the dam that supplied power to the Alcan Aluminum plant in Kitimaat overrode any sense of the intricate web of relationships within the territory of the T'en Cheslatta peoples and the waters around the Haisla community and ruptured the connections through flooding the territory and polluting the waters. The industry charged with the Kemano/Kitimaat project exhibited a blind pride in their ability to build dams and to transport electricity for miles, a control over nature that continues to create spiritual problems for other peoples and cultures whose life is deeply connected to their being a part of the land. In his reflections on Native spirituality, Taiaiake Alfred speaks of the land as "the source of our identity" and asks how "we can be Onkwehonne people, practice being Indigenous, if we are disconnected from the land" (Alfred, "Indigenous" 168). While this spirituality and identity call for a careful understanding and a mutuality that connect health of the land with health of the people, those who built the Kemano/Kitimaat project favoured the "knowledge that was ...instrumental or pragmatic" (Wirzba 18).<sup>75</sup> This kind of

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<sup>75</sup> Wirzba argues that "the very desire for indifferent ... knowing prevents us from seeing others in their full, mysterious depth," that the "distant, dispassionate stance...may also miss the

knowledge disconnects, separating land from its inhabitants, health from spirituality. Those in government and industry who base their decisions on this knowledge are also usually working from a distance and do not know, respect or consult with the people who have lived here about the knowledge they have developed in relation to this place over time. The mastery mode exercised through flooding T'en Cheslatta land is closed to these connections, to the mystery that would *grow* through a closer understanding of and engagement with their life on this land. Norman Wirzba continues his critique of this knowledge: “apparently what we ‘know’ has not translated into the sort of understanding that would enable us to affirm others in their integrity and equip us to live well or in a manner that facilitates mutual flourishing” (19). The government’s practice of not calling on industry to account for its blatant disregard shows its deep disdain and also makes it culpable, as pulp and paper mills and mining and oil companies continue to disrupt the complex of human and non-human relations along rivers and lakes. These practices of mastery result in homelessness and disconnection on many levels as they implicitly and explicitly reveal a mindset closed to the view that the life of this shared land depends on “intersubjective attunement” (Olthuis 145).

Postcolonial and ecocritical studies reflect the growing sensitivity to the way cultural identity shapes a community’s way of life in relation to the land. However, in terms of the relationship between peoples of different cultures, postcolonial studies sometimes cast approaches and meetings between different

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complexity and interconnectedness of the world that a charitable stance and vision...is able to see and understand” (4)

peoples and cultures *only* in terms of power-over, so that *any* kind of contact between them automatically results in a violation of otherness. This kind of analysis can create an essentialism that valorizes difference so much that it seals persons and cultures off from one another.<sup>76</sup>

James Olthuis cites others who argue that an “economy of exchange” is inherently an “economy of violence,” an argument based on the notion that violence is “irrevocably the fundamental human experience” (“Otherwise” 138). In this context, language can be seen as part of the struggle for mastery over others; Chief Justice Lamer’s “we are all here to stay,” for instance, then becomes an example of violently inclusive language that compromises the integrity of the other. Since this view dismisses as corrupt any contact that has “anything less than the perfect congruence,” Olthuis wonders whether it is “haunted by the ghost of purity and full presence” (138). He suggests an alternative through interpretation that “begins an interactive journey” where those who approach one another “can accept that intersubjective interconnection, interpretation, and interdependence may be avenues to enrichment and health rather than always necessarily flawed, oppositional, invasive, or totalizing” (143). He suggests that “the yawning spaces

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<sup>76</sup> This suggestion that humans and their identity within cultural communities are essentially *sealed off* has led to some postcolonial criticism that casts precontact cultures in pristine, edenic terms. Cynthia Sugars, for example, casts Robinson’s depiction of violence in another text onto “the ills of contemporary urban society, a form of Western psychosis that has *infected* Native peoples in Canada” (emphasis added). Jennifer Andrews also argues that the violence in *Monkey Beach* is “primarily associated with Eurocentric interventions in the Haisla community” (“Native”). While Sugars’s critique implicitly posits Native peoples tradition as an essentially pure and healthy body that becomes corrupted by the influences of “the contemporary” and “the urban,” Andrews assumes that precontact Haisla culture had some authentically pure identity. Robinson’s *Monkey Beach*, however, challenges these perspectives (see Kramer-Hamstra “Rumors.” 114-115).

between” cultures and peoples “can become places of passage and threshold – sacred interspaces” (143). This is a shift from the assumption that meeting with difference is always a power play, a shift that is promising in its suggestion that another kind of power is at work in “sacred interspaces.” Founded on the “yearning for healthy connection, shared power, mutuality, and right relation,” this practice suggests that the approach to another is an experience of mystery (Olthuis 138). This yearning is based on trust beyond oneself, trust that exchange can open up possibilities that neither culture nor person could predict or imagine.

### **A Discovery of Strangers**

Because this chapter’s focus is on the meeting of difference between peoples, much of its discussion will center on Rudy Wiebe’s *A Discovery of Strangers*. The particular subject of *Strangers* – the meeting between the Tetsot’ine peoples and the British during John Franklin’s first overland expedition to the Arctic coast (1819-1822) – is important given the context within which this dissertation discusses the relationship between becoming at-home and stories: the legacy of such meetings between Europeans and First Nations.

Rudy Wiebe traces how the dominant British empire story determined the way leaders of the expedition approached the Arctic, the Tetsot’ine people, and their experiences of this land. The expedition’s approach to the land is framed through a mastery of facts - through the measurement of instruments whose calibrations the officers on the Franklin expedition “are duty-bound to write, the daily journal, the data piled in columns upon page after page” (158). This is a

regime that imagines that the truth of a place can be grasped through “being able to keep records with abstract precision for unfriendly scrutiny” (Seerveld, “On Identity” 203). Before they have even entered the land the expedition’s goal - to map the Arctic coastline from the Coppermine River to Hudson Bay according to their own schedule – shows an assumption of mastery over the land and its seasons. Their presumptions are quickly exhausted by their actual experience; the life of the land takes these characters beyond what they know.

The differences between a hermeneutics of appropriation and a hermeneutics of connection are powerfully manifested in Wiebe’s portrayal of the encounters and exchanges between the Tetsot’ine and the English. The leaders of the expedition - Dr. Richardson and John Franklin - see Tetsot’ine as their silent slaves, who furthermore have an obligation to show absolute hospitality to the explorers by forgoing their own needs for survival.<sup>77</sup> Robert Hood, meanwhile, asks how the Tetsot’ine hunters will manage to find enough food for both the expedition and their own people and his question shows he understands their relationship is an intersubjective one; he knows that here is another people who

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<sup>77</sup> While Keskarrah discerns the imperial demand the expedition leaders assume they are entitled to have over the Tetsot’ine, the expedition’s British servant John Hepburn reveals the role that the servants play to keep up the illusion of English civility that this sense of entitlement conceals: “If you care for them, you do what’s needed so they can return home with their great principles safe an’ precious as the crown jewels of England. How many English servants, you think, have had the strength to save the upper class their shining Christian principles?” (293). Through Hepburn’s insight Rudy Wiebe shows how empire-building and Christian principles are conflated by the upper class. The Christian God is domesticated, brought into service of imperialism as Hepburn wryly comments that in the mind of the English the Tetsot’ine are morally duty bound in “providing provision for *us*” (97 emphasis added), and that their demand is somehow in line with “the Supreme Being’s will as revealed” to the English (99).

return the Englishmen's gaze.

And the elders among the Tetsot'ine are doing just that. When Keskarrah discerns that the leaders of the expedition are blind to his people, he responds by setting limits on Tetsot'ine hospitality. While he acknowledges that the English are "guests," and that he has always been bound by the fundamental principles of hospitality that are part of the Tetsot'ine way of life, he remarks that "no one changes their whole life, for guests" (*Strangers* 265). In the face of the English gaze that ignores the Tetsot'ine as fully responding subjects, Keskarrah offers hospitality within bounds that do not infringe on the integrity of his own culture.

And yet Keskarrah also comes to recognize the difference between Robert Hood and the expedition's leaders so that once Hood leaves the English quarters that they have named Fort Enterprise and crosses the divide between the two cultures, he finds himself a strange but welcome guest at Keskarrah's hearth. This departure and arrival are carefully marked since as Hood walks towards Keskarrah's lodge Wiebe shifts the point of view briefly but pointedly so that the reader stands behind Franklin as he watches Hood while Wiebe highlights the shift from a hermeneutics of appropriation to one of connection: Franklin "does not know...that the Robert Hood he sees disappear into the spruce sheltering the one Yellowknife lodge...has, in fact, left him; vanished for ever" (143).<sup>78</sup> Hood's

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<sup>78</sup> Truthfulness in relation to another does not try to swallow up the distance or difference that lies between two characters and cultures, but, rather, respects these through careful attention. The distance that Hood travels over to get to Keskarrah's lodge is the distance between a hermeneutics of appropriation and one of connection. The differences between cultures are not

approach to the Tetsot'ine lodge takes him beyond all that Hood knows so that he truly must act on a trust beyond himself. Once inside the lodge he finds “in this warm place thick with indescribable smells there is no listable fact, not a single word. Never. Simply the *insatiable influx of eye* and uncomprehending, musical ear, of fingertips and skin” (158 emphasis added). As he experiences this “insatiable influx of eye,” Hood is being weaned away from the expedition’s habit of inspection. Rather, he is hungry to take in what this Tetsot'ine lodge offers through his senses, with no desire to comprehend or rearrange *for himself* what he sees, smells, touches. Greenstockings’s home is “thick with” what Hood cannot describe as he is “found” through meeting the other as other.

Wiebe suggests that the language and knowledge that Hood is accustomed to using are inadequate for this exchange. As they approach one another in this lodge Greenstockings sees that Hood “forgets his paper at last; his pencil falls....[and] she lays wood over the burning pencil” (160). When he first saw Hood drawing, Keskarrah asked Greenstockings, “Why fix you on his paper once when he can see you different every day?” (81). Hood lets go this way of knowing, of trying to “fix” Greenstockings for the expedition’s journals. As he lets go his pencil then, Hood lets go the idea that Greenstockings is static, and he enters into a truthfulness that seeks resonance. His body becomes “intense, listening” and instead of relying on his drawing as a way of understanding Greenstockings, the correspondence between them begins on her terms as she

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erased by his approach; rather as he moves towards the lodge he opens himself up to these differences.

approaches him within the context of her own world (162). Wiebe evokes mystery as Hood willingly entrusts himself to what he cannot know, cannot comprehend. Here in this lodge ‘strangers’ are indeed ‘discovering’ one another so that Wiebe’s emphasis on Hood’s openness can be translated as an “emphasis on mystery [that] safeguards truth by taking truth out of grasping hands. Truth grasps us.... we know the truth that is love (Ephesians 3:19). We cannot claim the truth, because the truth claims us” (Vandervelde 14). Truth that is marked by openness to another is manifested in being true *to* the integrity of another person or culture. While mastery over is based on determinations that make a closed text of another, that seal a people or a person off, truth is understood in relational terms, as mystery that understands that what makes up the integrity of humans cannot be completely comprehended.

The experience of mystery that has to do with the exercise of truthfulness within relationships goes hand in hand with the trustworthiness that marks love’s endurance, its “staying power.” Becoming at home begins when mastery as power *over* relaxes and steps back, moves beside, allowing one’s self to be claimed by mystery, to journeying *with* the other.

### **The Play of Knives in the Discourse of Mystery**

While this sense of mystery is important to a journeying with the other, a hermeneutics of connection calls for discernment. Zwicky’s notion of a “looking informed by love” needs to be complicated to include the importance of making distinctions between power-over and power to journey-with. Olthuis elaborates that a



hermeneutics of trust is not a naïve ‘see-no-evil, believe-no-evil’ approach.

...If alarm bells sound, if our intuitions are negative, trust and respect for ourselves call for a holding back which, when attended to, may lead to a pulling back and rejection of what is being offered.... a hermeneutics of trust is always tempered with (but not jettisoned by) a hermeneutics of suspicion.

(Olthuis145)

Just as trust is often cast as the opposite of suspicion, the trouble with defining mystery and mastery as oppositional is the implication that the manifestations and experience of mystery do not involve a complex dance. The places between persons and different cultures are not only ever full of possibilities for exchange, but are also fraught with power-over dynamics that are manifested differently in every culture.

In *Strangers*, Wiebe portrays these dynamics in the class-consciousness of the British as well as the place women were given among the Tetsot'ine through the acute observations of John Hepburn, servant/seaman of the expedition. Hepburn notices how Robert Hood cannot fully appreciate Greenstockings's calm response to the brutish advances of Back, another man in the expedition: "Mr. Hood did not consider that the 'lady,' who played with knives every day of her life, could have parted Mr. Back quite differently if she had chosen" rather than "confining herself to a long opening of near cloth rather than flesh" (*Strangers* 103). Hepburn, intimately familiar with the dominant story of the British class system, also sees how well Greenstockings knows and has persevered through the

power plays of the men around her. Her setting is so dangerous that when she experiences Robert Hood's "undemanding love" she thinks to herself: "If you were to live in delight and difference with one for long, you would have to kill all the other men in the world" (*Strangers* 208). Her authoritative use of her knife is gained from her work of butchering, skinning and preparing to make clothing from the skins of the animals the Tetsot'ine men hunt. Hepburn, with lovely understatement, observes that her skill with the knife allowed her many options so that she "could have parted Mr. Back quite differently *if she had chosen*" (Wiebe, *Strangers* 103, emphasis added). This mastery – her "great skill and power" – allows her to effectively repel attacks from not only her Tetsot'ine partner Broadface but also from the Englishman George Back (*OED* "Mastery" 3.a.). As she moves quickly to protect herself from Back, Greenstockings displays a well-developed sense, against the powerful odds of male domination, of her own integrity and authority. Even as she is subjected to power-over relationships, Greenstockings is grounded in the sense that she is a part of a story larger than this prevailing dominance in her culture, the larger story that Keskarrarah has taught her.

### **The larger story and the dominant story**

In contrast to the confinement of a dominant story an experience of mystery has to do with being conscious of standing inside of and participating in a larger story. Armand Ruffo asserts that in the face of continuing colonization by the Canadian state, "whatever authority we might claim from our Native status...must arise from our traditions – from language, spirituality, ceremony,

story...that we and those before us continue to doggedly hold on to despite incredible odds” (94). The condolence ceremonies that are a part of the governance of the Haudenosaunee can be traced to just such a story; of how the Peacemaker began what slowly grew into this alliance of former enemies. (See Chapter Two for a fuller description of this founding story.)<sup>79</sup>

The introduction of this thesis also traces the larger story of another liberation: the story of the Exodus. This narrative begins with Moses who is called to be part of the freeing of a people enslaved by the Egyptian empire. Moses had been raised as a prince in that empire and had fled to become a shepherd far away from its center, having given up all hope for his people’s liberation. But one day he notices a bush burning with a strange fire that does not consume it. It is this strangeness that beckons Moses, who has seen how Egyptian slavery consumes his people. A Voice speaks from the center of the fire telling him to take off his shoes, that he is standing on holy ground.<sup>80</sup> The fire and the Voice disclose themselves as Mystery, burning with passion to free the people and drawing Moses into this passion; he is called to confront Pharaoh and to lead the people out of Egypt. This One beyond him invites Moses to leave the narrow confines of his retirement and to participate in this larger story. Just as the founding story of the Iroquois Confederacy continues to shape Haudenosaunee thinking on alternatives

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<sup>79</sup> Examples of these larger stories include the story of the Iroquois Confederacy, which I call a founding story because it describes how this powerful alliance came into being. Stories of other kinds of liberation are also identified as larger stories – for example, the story of the Exodus. Both of these examples are also identified as larger stories because they continue to be reinterpreted as counternarratives to current dominant stories.

<sup>80</sup> Exodus 3.

to Canadian state practices of governance, the story of the way of life the freed Hebrew people were encouraged to live continues to shape alternatives to consumerist stories today. (See Introduction section “The Exodus Story and the Economy of Enough.”)

Rudy Wiebe’s *Strangers* is a powerful counternarrative to a dominant empire story – one which valorizes ‘discoverers’ and ‘civilizers.’ Turning on its head the imperial story’s explicit assumption of First Nations peoples as ‘child-like’ and ‘ignorant,’ for example, Wiebe’s fictional account is based on Dene peoples’ own stories of their life on the land as well as journals and letters written by the English during the Franklin expedition. In his article “Coursing a Naked Country” Wiebe quotes from the expedition’s second-in-command, Dr. Richardson’s April 1822 letter to his wife. It reveals the compassion that the Tetsot’ine had for the suffering of the last four survivors of twenty-five men who embarked on this impossible journey. On discovering these four near death, the Tetsot’ine “wept on beholding the deplorable conditions to which we were reduced. They nursed and fed us with the same tenderness they would have bestowed on their own infants” (qtd. in Wiebe “Coursing” 24). In this account one hears echoes of the larger story of the understanding the Tetsot’ine have of the suffering of these last men and how they then carried them to shelter. It is the imperialist English who are discovered to be helpless as babes and the Tetsot’ine response to their suffering shows less paternalism than compassion. *Strangers* describes how the English in the Arctic were not only “*inferior* to most nations,”

but how “they were also at a certain bull-headed point *fundamentally unteachable*” (Wiebe “Coursing” 26 emphasis added). They were, in the parlance of this chapter, closed to mystery: to what another culture has developed in relation to their particular history in a particular place on earth. Their arrogance rendered them “incapable of understanding the simultaneous two-way process of being transformed” (Olthuis 147) through exchange with another culture.

The main story in *Strangers* is not Franklin’s quest but the exchange between the Tetsot’ine and the English. In contrast to the dominant story of appropriation where “the strange is not only to be comprehended, but where all estrangement is to be overcome,” the title and the epigraph of Wiebe’s story explicitly suggest this is a larger story based on an acceptance of strangeness, that difference is foundational to any exchange (Olthuis 140). *Strangers* begins with “the land [that] is so long” (1) and ends with “the impenetrable, life-giving cold” of the arctic light (317) a land and story whose beginning and ending resonates with the epigraph

Strangely I heard a stranger say,

I am with you.

The “strangely” and “stranger” here signal Wiebe’s desire to probe the strangeness of the encounters between land and Tetsot’ine, land and expedition, two cultures and worldviews, as well as between individuals from each culture. In contrast to a dominant story’s desire for unity based on sameness, the strangeness of the “I am with you” resonates through each one

of these many encounters, revealing their polyphonic nature. The “strangely I heard” suggests the unexpected when what the British think they know fails them; it is the strangeness that Robert Hood and Greenstockings enter into as each allows for the trustworthiness of the other who says so strangely “I am with you.”

In the kaleidoscope of interpretations and approaches that are set into motion in these encounters Wiebe portrays a multiplicity that this chapter understands is part of an experience of a larger story, the mystery involved in becoming at-home. Rather than attempt to contain or order the overflow of factors that emerge in these encounters, one of Wiebe’s strategies for doing the multiple voices justice is the adoption of shifting points of view so that one voice does not dominate.

Mystery, with its focus on possibility and on a journeying-with, is a counter-weight to mastery whose focus uses the frame of probability and of being in control of the outcome of a journey. Mystery calls humans to participate in a larger story<sup>81</sup> about the world they live in, and to act on a trust beyond themselves. The name that the Yellowknife people give to themselves – the Tetsot’ine – means a person or a people “Who Know(s) Something a Little” (*Strangers* 4, 304, 308). This identity implies that they understand their life as a journeying-with; theirs is a life lived in relation to the land, to its creatures and climate. They know something a little as they take part in something much larger than themselves.

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<sup>81</sup> The larger stories that carry an implicit invitation for the listener to participate stand in stark contrast to the dominant story that dictates the terms of participation and does not wait or have room for the response of the listener.

Cree theologian (Swan Lake First Nation, Alberta) Ray Aldred describes what it means to be part of a larger story in terms of the ethos implicit among storytellers of First Nations oral traditions:

Another proper ethic among storytellers [of oral tradition] is that they do not ‘know’ a story but they ‘understand’ something. The difference between these two words being ...that knowing something meant that one had originated the idea. Thus, the person who said ‘I know’ was displaying arrogance because they assumed that wisdom *had begun with them*. On the other hand the person who said, ‘I understand’ was acknowledging that wisdom was something that flowed from the Creator and they were merely entering into a ‘river of understanding’ as it were. So then, a storyteller may exercise creativity *but the story is in control*, not the storyteller” (Aldred, “Resurrection” 5, emphasis added).

Because the “story is in control,” humans are invited to live in a posture of humility.<sup>82</sup> The kind of *understanding* that Aldred refers to contrasts to the knowledge that is used to have power *over* the other. Aldred’s description of the way the storyteller of the oral tradition “enters a river of understanding” suggests that one is part of a complex of relationships, and that the experience of mystery has to do with forgoing the need to control this river in all of its fluidity. Rather,

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<sup>82</sup> Cree scholar Neal MacLeod also speaks of the “humility that old people have in Cree narrative” (“Cree” 16). He notes how many begin a story by saying “*namoya mistahi e-kiskeyihtaman*”: (“I do not know very much”)” (ibid). Those who participate in this way, says MacLeod, do “not believe they have power over the narrative, or own it [but] that there was a balance between the individual and tradition” and MacLeod notes that in this “play between the individual and collective...no understanding can ever be complete, because there could always be more interpretations” (ibid). MacLeod likens this to Paul Ricoeur’s idea of narrative’s “surplus of meaning.”

humans are invited to enter into what Aldred calls “that wisdom...that flow[s] from the Creator,” a story and a wisdom that is ongoing.<sup>83</sup> The mystery of this wisdom easily slips away from grasping hands or minds since receiving the mystery has to do with, in George Vandervelde’s terms, the “wonder and awe that is...commensurate with mystery....[when] one has a sense of being embraced by mystery; [that sense that] one *indwells* mystery; one knows mystery as one’s home” (Vandervelde 5, emphasis added).

The image of entering a river of understanding suggests that in becoming a part of this larger story one is entering a trust beyond oneself, trust that the goodness the Creator has begun in creation lies beyond the grasp of any empire story. The humility that comes from knowing oneself as a very small part of this larger story begun at creation carries with it a recognition of welcome interdependency, a respect for boundaries, and a recognition of the limits of human knowing. While Chapter Two discussed the relationship between boundaries and sound relationships in Eden Robinson’s *Monkey Beach*, her portrayal of these boundaries also highlights the need to respect non-human creatures by acknowledging human limitations. Mick and Lisamarie are emptying

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<sup>83</sup> Norman Wirzba also explores the difference between “knowledge and understanding,” arguing that this difference is decisive.” (all quotations are taken from page 8). “The process of understanding,” he says, “entails a much more intimate, and thus also more complex, involvement and participation in what is understood” than the process involved in the production of knowledge. Echoing Ray Aldred’s image of understanding as a river that one enters, Wirzba writes that “as we enter the domain of understanding, we move past a description of things (the surface perception of them) to ...their sense, direction, integrity, and purpose as well as their connectedness with others. At a bare minimum, understanding requires our interaction with and participation in things in a way that knowing about them simply does not. Wisdom reflects this” (Wirzba).



Mick's crab traps when they find a halibut among the crabs. When Mick throws it back into the water Lisamarie asks "What'd you do that for?" and he responds that "It's a magical thing. You aren't supposed to touch them if you don't know how to handle them." He answers Lisamarie's protest that "It's just a halibut" by questioning her understanding: "Do you know how it got in the pot?" And when she shakes her head, he underlines the boundary that is set by their ignorance: "Then leave it alone" (99). Attending to mystery includes acknowledging that there are regions of knowledge and experience that are harmful and that require a restraining of imperialistic desires to see and to know everything. Lisamarie's Uncle Mick challenges thinking and practices that assume technical knowledge gives humans the right to go ahead and use it, whether or not they are aware of how its use will affect the relations that make up the particular life of this place.

Aldred's description of the storyteller who is aware that one is a part of a larger story and that this story is in control, also provides a counternarrative to a discourse of mastery that assumes one particular culture and tradition has the corner on truth. Taiaike Alfred adds to this sense that there is a story larger than any one culture can contain when he speaks of Indigenous "traditional teachings" that assume that each of the "various human families" is "gifted and powerful in its own way" (*Peace* 45). Alfred goes on to challenge "each one [of these families] to discover its gift in itself and realize it fully....to cultivate the values that promote peace and harmony.... to the benefit of humanity as a whole" (*Peace*

45).<sup>84</sup> Aldred and Alfred both imply that each tradition, in its particular response to the life of the world, has gifts it can develop and offer to other traditions, that each of the various human cultures reveals a small but important part of a much larger story. An appreciation for such difference is an appreciation for mystery that one can only hope will shape the exchanges that will make this shared land a place to stay.

### **The language of dreams and the larger story.**

The experience of mystery where a character is being called beyond the confines of a narrower dominant story often utilizes unfamiliar modes of communication. In “Mars Thunderchild Gets a Calling” (*Suite: INDIAN*), Shelley Niro employs the language of dreams;<sup>85</sup> as it rearranges the familiar, a dream creates alternative understanding. In Mars’s dream, the iconic figure of Sitting Bull steps out of the still life photo she has of him and comes calling. When she answers his knock on her door there he is, carrying with him a sense of the world that takes her by surprise. When she marvels at the glittering sphere in his hands he leaves it with her and disappears; she tucks it under her pillow and falls asleep. When she slowly wakes the next morning and recalls the dream, she finds “the

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<sup>84</sup> Alfred’s view also counters the individualism that runs hand in hand with a consumerist idealization of choice: he speaks of *human families*, explicitly saying that each individual is a part of something larger than oneself.

<sup>85</sup> This language is taken up in *Strangers* as well. Through her long dream Birdseye discerns how ignorance is the Englishmen’s guide that leads them down the path of death by starvation and cold. Keskarrah’s dreams, meanwhile, are an integral part of the People’s hunting. Wiebe also refers to the prophetic power through dream vision among the people who warned of the devastation that uranium mining (from “Forbidden Rock” in *Strangers* 272) would bring the First Nations communities in the area of what was later named Port Radium, Northwest Territories (James 87).

world” is still there. Her dream of Sitting Bull’s call introduces her to the wonder that is the world, which Niro implicitly says is not just an ephemeral dream that dissipates in the light of day. Mars’s response of gratitude opens up the narrow parameters of the consumer culture and materialism that are evoked in the opening scene of this segment. Sitting Bull invites her to participate in this strange yet familiar sphere.

Niro does not cast the mystery here – the gift that is life-in-the world and the call to participate - as a treasure of past Indigenous tradition. The “world” that Sitting Bull presents to Mars is a disco mirror ball, at the end of what looks like a war club or a mace, blending a tacky disco object with traditional-looking Native gear. In this glitzy rendering of the world Niro sabotages any sense of mystic or “authentically” Indigenous spirituality and insists that wonder and respect can be regenerated even in relation to this campy, degraded item from consumer culture.

While Niro uses the language of dreams to point her characters to a story larger than consumerism, Wiebe’s character Keskarrah discerns the seeds of a consumer way of life that the expedition is introducing onto this continent. This power or spirit is not a neutral one, but one that harms as it enslaves people in a particular way.

### **Discerning the spirits: The Spirit of Things.**

“They must want more than they need. That is civilization” (*Strangers* 59).

In a conversation between John Franklin and Dr. Richardson on what it means to be civilized in Rudy Wiebe’s *Strangers*, Richardson reveals his

allegiance to what the Tetsot'ine elder Keskarrah will discern is “a spirit, of things.” This spirit, which today finds a magnificent dwelling place in shopping malls,<sup>86</sup> shapes Richardson’s perspective as he argues that there is a “fundamental problem” with the Tetsot'ine, and it concerns “the economic development of primitives”(59). If the Tetsot'ine, he continues, “understood money, they would work harder to get more of it, in order to buy what they want....they must want more than they need” (59). The spirit of things that Richardson associates with civilization grates up against the Tetsot'ine way of life. Although this spirit is ephemeral in the sense that it is ‘in the air,’ Tetsot'ine elders Keskarrah and Birdseye both discern and judge that its effect is unhealthy, that the sickness the English bring is “more than blisters,” is not only visible on the body but its substance is first of all invisible: “a *spirit*, of *things*” (269 emphasis in text). They discern how it becomes visible in the restlessness it creates in their own people through the desire for more and how this desire challenges the way of life and worldview the Tetsot'ine have developed on and with the life of the land:

They want us to hunt caribou...because they need that meat to eat too...but they want us to *live different* too. They really want us to *use up our lives* killing small animals, as many as we can [but]....Why kill every small animal? To please Whites? Why? And destroy ourselves in winter and

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<sup>86</sup> It is also present along grocery store aisles. The main character of the 2009 feature film *Hurt Locker*, for example finds himself in an aisle a vast variety of cereals on his return to the U.S. from military duty in Afghanistan. The spirit manifested in the overload of choice of things cannot hold him here since for him the spirit of war is much more alluring and engaging; he returns to Afghanistan at the end of a film that begins with the epigram “war is a drug.”

summer walking the tundra like loaded dogs to the traders with the fur? To get powder for guns? If we don't use their guns, we won't have to carry powder or lead. (263 emphasis added)

Keskarrah intuitively understands how a way of life driven by this spirit will consume the land, the “small animals,” as well as the Tetsot'ine's own energy as they “walk the tundra like loaded dogs.” However, two of the men known for their hunting skills are seduced by this spirit. The Hook and Bigfoot proudly wear the “shiny medal” that Franklin has given to them, which symbolizes for Keskarrah the dependency that this spirit of things creates. He calls the medal “this shining little shit they hang around People's necks,” which The Hook “can never take...off or he'll lose it, and so even the sun plays with it every day. Behind their quick kindness, These English are deadly” (269). Keskarrah is speaking this to Greenstockings as prophecy, a truth-telling, “because her memory of the coming and going of these strangers will live far beyond his own” (268). Wiebe contrasts the hard glitter of these medals to the fragile beauty of Keskarrah's and Greenstockings's lives on this land, comparing them in their canoe as they travel to “birds in the tiny shell they built for this travelling” (269). The tiny shell of the canoe is distinct from the hard medal and the demands “for everything at once” that the economy of “Whitemuds” represents; Keskarrah and Greenstockings will leave the canoe “at the last portage for the next traveler, or to rot back into the land” (269). The canoe is not their possession; it is meant for any who will travel this way. And ultimately, it belongs to the land from which it was fashioned.

Through Keskarrah's suspicion of this spirit of things and its manifestation in the desire for more than is needed, Wiebe portrays the advent among the Tetsot'ine of an imperialistic force that continues to be part of the contemporary dominant story. It also continues to be challenged, and not only in this portrayal of the meeting between the Franklin expedition and the Tetsot'ine. In keeping with Wiebe's critique of this force as a *spirit* of things, I would like to highlight two leaders in particular who assert that nothing less than a spiritual revolution can provide a counternarrative to this dominant story. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann confronts North American Christianity – both liberal and conservative – arguing that it is “so largely enculturated to the American ethos of consumerism that it has little power to believe or act” out of the Biblical narrative, which centers on a generous, sustaining Creator (*Prophetic* 1). As I pointed out in the introduction of the thesis, Brueggeman identifies how deeply entrenched a sense of “not enough” is in this culture and he calls for a critique of these powers through a rereading of the Biblical narrative. From his own First Nations perspective, Alfred critiques this “spirit of things” as a part of the “modern liberal ideology of ...individualism and unrestrained consumption” that is characterized by “selfishness and competitiveness” (*Wásase* 131). He goes on to speak of the influence on the Indigenous communities of the “liberal modern values of material efficiency and social Darwinism, the concept of progress, and the fundamental but rarely stated belief in Euroamerican cultural

and racial superiority” (127).<sup>87</sup> As it casts the earth as a global marketplace this restless consumerism threatens the staying power that is grounded in cultural and communal identity, and that gives meaning and shape to life in a specific place in time.

### **The Mastery of the Kill; the Mystery of the Hunt.**

The experience of mystery as the power to stay is portrayed in *Strangers* also through Keskarrah’s attention to how a new technology will affect the longstanding relationships that have developed here over time between the human and animal creatures. Early in the novel St. Germaine, the expedition’s translator distinguishes between killing and hunting as he tries to tell the English that guns are “how to kill. Not hunt” (71). In contrast to the relations that are acknowledged in the hunt, the gun that “screams ‘I’M HERE!’ for unbelievable distances in all directions” signifying a mastery that overpowers all but its own voice (23). Keskarrah sees how the Tetsot’ine who are caught up by the guns of “these English,” are exchanging “the ecstatic dreams of good animals” for the gun’s “iron ignorance” and the “male excitement of raids” (316). The gun that kills seems blunt and primitive compared to the sophistication that Tetsot’ine

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<sup>87</sup> This particular ethos is so pervasive and seductive that Alfred calls for a warrior stance against it. A warrior is “someone who actually has the courage to stand up and break barriers and to even reject values that they’ve been socialized to accept that maybe just don’t work for them or don’t work for their families or their community. I think being a warrior involves a lot of risk, in that you might be standing alone, you might have to lead some people” (260).

hunting requires: of skillful listening, moving quickly and quietly with snowshoes, or “floating in tiny canoes on the silent water and spearing fast” (23).

Greenstockings teaches Hood the interdependence that is assumed by the ... hunt. As she offers him food she tries to prepare him for the expedition’s impending attempt to reach the Arctic coast by telling him of the kindness of the animals towards the hunter who is too weakened by starvation to hunt properly; that the

... ravens can lead him to what the wolves kindly leave for us....remember, when you are too weak to think...look in the sky. Raven will be there. He will lead you to our sister wolf. Leave food for her and her little ones when you have some, and she will always leave some for you. (173).

This practice of hunting manifests the power to sustain, to enter into the mystery of journeying-with. The exchange that Greenstockings describes here resonates with the epigraph’s “Strangely I heard a stranger say,/ I am with you.” Through the reciprocity among raven, “sister wolf” and the respectful human, a strange space is cleared that creates a calm center of trust for the hunter “too weak to think.” Mystery is manifested in the dreaming, the respect and the gratitude the Tetsot’ine have for whatever the animals will offer in this sojourn.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Wiebe’s portrayal of the clash between hunting with the gun or hunting by spear and/ or arrows is not nostalgic but a way of showing how worldviews grind up against one another in this initial meeting. Elsewhere Wiebe critiques a history text still in use today, that condescendingly argue the Cree were “incapable of bridging the gap between centuries alone and unassisted” (Wiebe “Land” qtd *The Birth of Western Canada*). He notes: “the Aboriginal prairie peoples rapidly undertook an adaptive change of their society which amounted to a social and cultural revolution....that, within less than half a century many of the Woodland Cree people changed from a small-group canoe-and-trapping-and-stalking-solitary-animals people to



**Non-Human Powers: The spirit world in Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach***

Noting how “until as late as the 1920s...powerful medicine ... dominated” the Dene world, Wiebe describes this area as “too little researched,” since for the Dene “it may be at least as significant as the economics of cultural change” (“Coursing” 27). As Rudy Wiebe shows through Keskarrah’s discernment of the “spirit of things,” the realm of spirits is not as Gareth Griffith suggests, understood in terms of an ephemeral or dislocated “spiritual space” evoked through undefined “ritual practice and cultural narrative” (445). This discernment of spirits or forces at work in the culture that the English bring also contests the way Griffiths identifies the “sense of the numinous and the sacred” that is only “resident in indigenous, precolonial religious practices” (445). Rather, spirituality as this chapter understands it is more complicated, is neither neutral nor a phenomenon exclusive to Indigenous cultures. It is manifested in actual experiences of the world, in mystery or mastery, in the dynamics that are continually at work in shaping all human cultures. Powers and spirits both move humans and are engaged *by* humans either to journey-with others *or* to disconnect and dominate. What is the relationship, in Wiebe’s *Strangers* and Robinson’s *Monkey Beach*, between the spirit world and having the power to “stay”? How are non-human powers manifested between characters in terms of becoming at home or being further colonized?

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become incomparable horse-riders who hunted [buffalo] in precisely organized groups, where the behaviour of each hunter was ordered and assigned” (“Land, Language and Law” 45).

Keskarrah's dreams in *Strangers* are powerful medicine, serving the Tetsot'ine people as they hunt, while Birdseye's long dream foresees in detail the demise of the Franklin expedition. While the spirit world's relation to the Tetsot'ine is manifested mainly through these dreams, Eden Robinson's portrayal of the spirit world in *Monkey Beach* is set in the context of the secret abuse that tears at the fabric of Lisamarie's community and her search for trustworthiness, a search that includes testing the spirits who visit her. Her Ma-ma-oo and Uncle Mick teach her a "hermeneutics of suspicion" as she contends with these powers.

Robinson draws a close connection between the spirit realm, retaliation and the violence that threatens to implode Lisamarie's community. Spirits haunt the site of Monkey Beach where, according to a founding story in this Haisla community, a former Haisla man left on the beach for dead is transformed into the first B'gwus who then retaliates against those who have drowned him. As noted in Chapter Two, Robinson shows how retaliation ends dialogue, how it deepens the unhomely silence that already isolates members of this community in a cultivated secrecy over abuse. The spirits that visit Lisamarie mirror the malevolence that is perpetuated through Josh's retaliation; they almost succeed in silencing her when they lure her into thinking that she can "pay" to bring her missing brother back from the dead, telling Lisamarie that if she will draw her blood for them they will tell her where her missing brother is (365-368). Both the force of retaliation and these haunting presences are parasitic, feeding on the evil that has happened to members of the community.

Although Jodey Castricano evokes a spiritual traditionalism in her claim that in “learning to talk with ghosts” Lisamarie is “taking on the responsibility of an heir....accepting her role as shaman, Robinson suggests that the ephemeral, otherworldly spirit realm is not where humans can become at-home (“Learning,” 811). Her grandmother Ma-ma-oo who acts as spiritual mentor to Lisamarie warns her to “never trust the spirit world too much,” (153) and suggests that there is a clear boundary between the spirit and the physical world when she tells Lisamarie that in her search for her brother the spirits have led her “too far into ....the land of the dead” (372). It is not ghosts but her beloved human relations who call Lisamarie away from the terrifying confines of violence to the larger place of human agency.<sup>89</sup> Robinson suggests becoming at-home has to do with generation and regeneration in *this* world through the struggle for justice; while Ma-ma-oo shouts for Lisamarie to “make me some grandkids,” Mick urges her to “go out there and give ‘em hell. Red power!” (373). He recalls Lisamarie’s brave resistance as a Grade Two student who refuses her teacher’s prompting to read from “a book that said that the Indians on the northwest coast of British Columbia had killed and eaten people as religious sacrifices” (68). In this chapter’s reading, mystery is evoked in *Monkey Beach* when the power to stay the force of mastery-over is exercised by human or by spirit.

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<sup>89</sup> At that point in the story, Ma-ma-oo is dead; however, Robinson does not portray her nor her dead Uncle Mick as spirits who speak to her from the land of the dead. Lisamarie experiences them as full-bodied speaking people, even describing her Uncle Mick’s typical antic dance after he has spoken to her from there.

**Mystery in that “fragile tabernacle of and for meeting.”**

Power-with rather than power-over is the motivating spirit that calls us *beyond* ourselves even as it deepens our sense of self....The dance of interpretation ineluctably draws us *out of ourselves* into what I have called the realm of ‘between’...not an auxiliary construction, but the real place and bearer of what happens between persons.... Rather than being a neutral empty space ...the field between is a hermeneutical with-space, a fragile tabernacle of and for meeting that is continually shaped and reshaped in a reciprocal interplay of influences. (Olthuis 146)

In the face of James’s claim that Wiebe’s *Strangers* portrays the “unbridgeable gulf that lies between European and Indigenous values” how does one read Wiebe’s portrayal of the relationship between Greenstockings and Robert Hood (83)? While Wiebe laments ways that both cultures exercise power-over, in Greenstockings’s and Hood’s relationship he explores the possibilities of exchange, possibilities that are opened through respect for the differences between them. Despite the “quick desperate brevity” of their relationship Wiebe moves these characters from mastery’s determinism to mystery’s possibilities and locates the portrayal of their relationship at the center of *Strangers* (207).

As I said earlier, this relationship develops as Hood is drawn out of himself, as he forgets even his drawing pencil in the warm strangeness that he finds in Keskarrah’s and Birdseye’s lodge. As he listens intently he demonstrates

a willingness to wait for a response that he cannot predict. He has opened himself to this place and to Greenstockings, not as projections of himself or his culture's way of life, nor as objects that he thinks he has a right to "grasp." In his "I am with you" he expects reciprocation. This approach is foreign to Greenstockings's experience of men. She reflects on the "quiet and patience in him," a "stillness" that she contrasts to "every man who has watched her," as if she is "a piece of something to be groped for inside his thick head but that he won't find there until he finally takes her between his hands" (*Strangers* 161). As Greenstockings tries to locate the "gentle demandlessness" that "drifts about" Hood, she finds a parallel in the attitude of "a hunter dreaming animals to come *when they want to*" (161, emphasis added). Hood's attention is like the attention given to the hunt as opposed to the kill, as the hunter waits for the animal to come and to offer itself.

Greenstockings finds the "kind of undemand" that Hood offers her is "strange...strange"; the connection between them becomes possible only because they do not try to comprehend one another through a knowing that tries to either erase or to grasp the difference between them. A "fragile tabernacle of and for meeting" (Olthuis 146) is being constructed here because "no one intrudes with an acceptable understanding" (162). "Acceptable understanding" is associated with the expedition's official approach, and is similar to the surface of determinisms to which Flannery O'Connor refers, which the writer who believes life is essentially mysterious will "go through" in his/her "interest in possibility rather than in probability" ("Mystery" 42). Adequate understanding fails, like Hood's drawings, because it could never articulate what is being shaped here in this

meeting.<sup>90</sup> A “fragile tabernacle of and for meeting” is created between them here where Greenstockings finds herself becoming at-home with the first man who forgoes demand and invites her through respect and attendance. Against the backdrop of mastery-over violence they create a newness recalled in the Tetsot’ine myth about the creation.

As he watches Greenstockings and Hood’s relationship unfold, Keskarrah frames its demandlessness in “the old and always new sacred story” of how the world started “when Sky came to Earth and they lay together” (89). He pointedly notes that this story is

not about eating each other, no. It is about woman and man lying together...like bears who grow into each other for three days or maybe four...and you can touch them wherever you wish and they lick you tenderly because they want no more than what they already have. (89)

Keskarrah’s focus here is on mutuality where exchange deepens because what one discovers in the other is not sameness but a strangeness that, when it is attended to, it deepens staying power.

The story of how the first woman came into being begins with the problem the first man has of being “alone and lonely...and desperately hungry” (90). His hunger brings out his need to pay close attention to how other creatures move in this landscape. Not meant to be self-sufficient, this first man watches “rabbits and caribou and ptarmigan travel so lightly on” the snow that always encumbers him,

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<sup>90</sup> In “The Spirit of the Arctic” Kenneth Hoepfner identifies “the strangeness of the ‘other’” that Greenstockings and Hood discover here and notes that the “scene of their love-making is intercut with Birdseye’s dream of the failure of the expedition’s quest for knowledge” (148)

and he begins to dream he had larger feet that could run “as easily as the animals” (90). He begins what Olthuis calls a “dance of interpretation” that “draws him out of himself” as he bends birch into two loops and puts his feet into their center so that he begins to adjust his own shape (Olthuis 146). In this act he comes up against his partial understanding and its limits since he knows his feet “were in the right place – but he didn’t know what to do with the centre” (90). This story is not about an individual “genius” since the man by himself is stuck with these loops and the “sad emptiness” at their center. He sets them aside and continues to hunt and to catch nothing, growing hungrier every day until one day as he returns to his shelter he hears a sound inside and rushes towards it, only to see a ptarmigan fly out through an opening at the top. He returns at the end of the following day to find a fire burning inside and the loops of birch drying beside it, their centers “half woven over with babiche” (leather strips) (90). The hunter’s shelter becomes a “place of meeting” through a “reciprocal interplay of influences” (Olthuis 146). The next day, having covered any escape route, he returns early and catches the ptarmigan, who “turned into what he had often dreamed: someone like himself but so different! Woman, yes, who...alone could fill the frames he had dreamed and bent” (91). As he watches Greenstockings and Hood, Keskarrah tells this origin story of exchange between different creatures, a meeting that changes and transforms both: “She changed when he held her, but her holding changed him as well” since he is able to now run over the snow as easily as a rabbit (91). While this larger story threads its way through Wiebe’s portrayal of the love between

Greenstockings and Hood, it also recalls Aldred's description of the understanding that flows from the Creator of this first man. Here understanding or wisdom combines love and truth as the ptarmigan/woman and the man help one another to find a way of being in this place that lies in the grip of winter.

Later, when after Robert Hood's death she recalls their strange time together in the warmth of the lodge, Greenstockings notes that their discovery of one another happened "in the fixed conjunction of her mother's and father's power": a staying power that includes both Birdseye's discernment of the failure of the expedition's way of knowing and Keskarrah's powerful recall of the larger story of exchange (208). Even as she is surrounded by the brute force of men from both cultures, her strength builds on "this strange... short moment of profound difference," this becoming at-home, an experience of mystery that she and Hood shared in the face of the hegemony of mastery.

### **Conclusion: Staying Power and "Rearranging the Mysteries"**

The discourses of mastery and of mystery are not merely the stuff of fictional narratives or a culture's founding stories. Deliberate attention to mystery<sup>91</sup> is a very real intervention in the standard procedures of bureaucratized politics. As he describes his work in jurisprudence in his *First Nations*

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<sup>91</sup> The discourse of mystery includes humility through realizing that one is a small part of a larger story, respect for the boundaries that mark the integrity of others, respect for the limitations of knowledge that is abstracted from the specific relationships that make up life-on-earth.



*Jurisprudence and Aboriginal Rights* (2006), James Youngblood (Sákéj)

Henderson's discernment of the powers and spirits within this area creates hope that a "fragile tabernacle to and for meeting" between First Nations communities and the other communities that make up this shared place, can be built. In his preface, Henderson describes the Constitutional Proclamation signing ceremony on 17 April 1982 which marked the patriation of the Canadian Constitution and the formal end of the "the 'long and oppressive colonial era for Aboriginal peoples'" (8). The work that Henderson describes in the rest of the text, work that continues, is based on this new Constitution as it "proclaimed and entrenched the rights of First Nations as beyond the power of a transient legislative majority and individual rights and freedoms. It established a new integrative order in Canada, which had previously been dismissed as 'inherently unrealistic'" (34).

Constitutionally, this proclamation wedged open a new and strange place within which jurists familiar with aboriginal jurisprudence can begin their work. This new constitutional understanding, however, is fragile: the life that it offers in its untried strangeness is precarious in the face of the other powers that are at work within the unfolding of the Canadian state.

These powers come together at the signing ceremony that Henderson describes: the power of the legacy of colonialism, the powerful myth that Canada is founded on two nations –neither of them a first nation – is represented at the signing by the presence of French Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau and the English Queen Elizabeth II. The dominant story of colonial power is very

much a part of what is still “in the air” at this ceremony; in the Queen’s and in the Prime Minister’s presence, Henderson “hears the distant rhetoric: ‘Your Majesty, Your Royal Highness, Excellencies...’” a rhetoric that has historically been used to express exclusionary privilege. As he watches them sign Henderson recalls and fears a continuation of the legacy of “ink words on paper...broken promises hiding behind paper words,” well-founded doubts that “the writing on the wall [will be able to] preserve the details of our visions, tragic experiences, and deep meanings contained in these concise words against the shortcoming of political memory and power” (3).

However, Henderson, member of the Bear Clan of the Chickasaw Nation and the Cheyenne Tribe, legal studies professor and a First Nations negotiator for constitutional reform, witnesses within this signing ceremony another ceremony. In the presence of these two powers and this legacy he grows aware of a larger sovereignty through First Nations dancers and singers who are “opening the path to another realm...respectfully humming an ancient invitation song. They were transforming space into the teaching place” (3-2). A place of exchange is being opened up as this constitutional space becomes a “teaching place” where the probability of mastery-over relations is challenged by possibility. Through this “ancient invitation song” Henderson perceives again the gifts given by “the keeper of the teaching of the birds, the clouds, the stars of the big blue sky”. The drum rhythms

... unfolded the durable jurisprudence of the Life-giver's covenants as in a breath, the dancers belonged to all things, again – with the first sun, after the long rain, the morning star, and the sweet earth – and the old teachings were renewed....In honour of that unity, the singers' voices joined together. They began to rearrange the mysteries.... [and Henderson] began to perceive the comforting clarity of the teachings in many nourishing languages. He was learning again the teachings of the Life-giver.... (3-4)

This chapter argues that the experience of mystery breaks through oppressive legacies. In this context, when mystery is 'rearranged' a shift takes place among powers that seek to dominate on political and economic levels. They are shuffled at a fundamental level. As he becomes aware of the ancient yet new "gifts of the keeper of the teachings of the birds," the temporal powers in front of him are rearranged, are put into perspective. The mystery of the "durable jurisprudence of the Life-giver's covenants" – the ordering of life-on-earth, and the depth of the "Life-giver's covenants" that sustains all of this life. Attending to these mysteries rearranges political ordering and legacies.

The dancers and singers are creating a strange space here at the signing ceremony as they usher Henderson into an awareness of belonging to a far greater realm than the national and political realm within which he is developing a place for understanding of Aboriginal jurisprudence. The Life-giver's "sweet earth" tells a much larger story than the dominant one has told so far. Another

sovereignty is present, one that expresses itself in a radically different way.

Through the drumming and the songs this larger story tells of a sovereignty whose presence is a gift and who brings gifts, countering a political history marked by appropriation and erasure. The ancient songs that Henderson witnesses and that move his spirit signify an order that defies explanation.

Henderson notes that “a gentle rain began” as he heard Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau state that this patriation meant Canada would be stepping into the unknown in terms of clearing colonized space for the legitimate and continuing place of First Nations (1). The gentle rain that descended as Henderson witnessed the patriation of the constitution became a “torrent...which many Elders called a healing rain” when Queen Elizabeth II signed and noted that she was “‘particularly pleased’ with the Constitution’s ‘innate respect’ for [aboriginal] rights ‘reflected in the willingness of the national and provincial governments to consult with the representatives of native peoples and to work out solutions to longstanding problems of rights and opportunities’”(2). What Henderson describes here is a powerful counter-narrative to the story of Canadian nation-building. Along with the way the Elders read the rain as healing, Henderson witnesses the presence of the “keeper of the birds”; traditional Indigenous teachings that reflect an alternative understanding of humans in relation to the creation and Creator as well as teachings of Indigenous governance and jurisprudence are moving into this cleared space.

Len Findlay’s reading of Henderson’s description of this First Nations ceremony where the singers and dancers begin to “rearrange the mysteries,” locates Henderson’s spirituality in a more “private” area of “self-renewal” (“Long March,” 4). In contrast, this chapter interprets and places this rearrangement in the public sphere, arguing that powers to stay are being manifested through these references to the Creator’s sustaining presence. Henderson’s experience of this mystery has direct implications for and interventions in his work in jurisprudence. While artists such as Eden Robinson, Shelley Niro and Rudy Wiebe imaginatively trace and explore the movement of powers that contribute to becoming at home within and without dominant stories, Henderson traces and develops what staying power means in the area of politics, of law, of jurisprudence. His witness to the Lifegiver’s invitation to him to participate in the larger story of the “durable jurisprudence of the Lifegiver’s covenants” has implications for his work as a jurist. He engages in discernment of the spirits and powers at work in the old order of the British and Canadian judiciary, for example in the concrete ramifications of the way its laws make the

distinction between ‘primitive’ and ‘civilized’ ...[a] distinction – considered natural and normative – [which] presumed that all people were progressing, or would progress, from initial savagery through an intermediate stage of barbarism, to reach the desired final state of European civilization. The implicitly evolutionary process combined with the negative nuance of the

term ‘primitive’ was the primary tool of colonial British legal thought, especially legal conceptualism or positivism. (8-9)

Just as Keskarrah discerns the “spirit of things” that the English expedition introduces to his people, Henderson’s work includes discerning the powers and dynamics that shape Western/European jurisprudence as he sets them alongside those that shape First Nations jurisprudences. He discerns for example, that the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* is based on an understanding of humans as “individual” units, that “rights and freedoms” in the Charter only ever address this model of humans as individual and therefore are “distinct from the ancestral rights derived from the Creator and traditions” and so are “not applicable to Aboriginal, treaty, or other rights of First Nations” (35). Henderson speaks of his hope that this work will continue “constitutional reform [which] can become a tool for making living together on the shared land fairer and rediscovering good relations through legal and epistemic pluralism” (240). His hopefulness carries the tension of continuing injustice as well as the desire to work towards peace that works to set things right. This hope and the work of peace that is willing to live in creative tension are qualities of mystery. In the language of this chapter, this work develops staying power in a place of exchange where ongoing negotiations create mutual flourishing: rumours of a larger story.

## **Conclusion: On Silence and Heterglossia, Stories and Becoming At-Home**

*To begin a story, someone in some way must break a particular silence.*

Wiebe and Johnson, *Stolen Life* 3.

### **A Particular Silence**

This thesis examines the relationship between stories and home-making by taking up how culture-wrecking silences have been both imposed, and broken in three aspects foundational to home-making: the life of the non-human and human household, the particular hearth fire that is central to human belonging, and the essential Mystery of life. Each fictional story taken up by this thesis highlights a particular silence. As these stories explore these silences the characters who have been silenced speak -- and the land speaks, too. Mystery is evoked in the dialogue of voices, in the interdependencies assumed in these stories told through film and novel by Robinson, Laurence, Wiebe and Niro. The voices that they imaginatively evoke join other voices in what M.M. Bakhtin calls the reality of heteroglossia: the reality of language in dialogue “outside the artist’s study” where her or his artistic discourse joins the conversation already going on “in the open spaces of public squares, streets, cities, villages” (“Discourse” 259).<sup>92</sup>

Specifically, Robinson’s, Laurence’s, Wiebe’s and Niro’s stories break silences in

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<sup>92</sup> Heteoglossia, Bakhtin continues, includes the multilayered language “of social groups, generations and epochs,” and in their breaking of silences Niro, Laurence, Wiebe and Robinson take up dialogue between generations (Chapter Two) as well as dialogue between epochs in their portrayals of the role of tradition (Chapter Two and Three) (Bakhtin, “Discourse” 259).

order to bring imaginative vision to the conversation and context of relations between Métis and First Nations communities and settler cultural communities.

Shelley Niro takes up the way stereotypes mute, distort or simplistically represent the life of Indigenous culture and communities in Canada. As her stories counter the reductive discourse of the stereotypes manufactured, for example, during the conflict at Oka, her work is like that of a sound engineer, turning down the volume of the dominant voice of the Canadian state with its legacy of seeking power over First Nations. Once this voice is muted, one hears the voices of clan mothers, of Matriachal Aunties, the voices of Hiawatha and the Peacemaker. Each voice suggests that there are alternatives to the governance practiced by the Canadian state as Niro takes up the theme of “warrior” and moves it out of the fear-mongering context the Canadian state and mainstream media have created.

Niro’s characters speak what Neal McLeod calls “wordarrows... words...like arrows that can be shot at the narratives of the colonial power” (McLeod, “Coming Home” 31). McLeod’s argument that “wordarrows have transformative power and can help Indigenous people ‘come home’ [by helping] to establish a new discursive space” effectively describes work such as Niro’s, as from within the context of Haudenosaunee culture and history her characters transform the meaning of “warrior.”

The same transformative power is at work in Rudy Wiebe’s story as he takes up the themes of “discovery” and “strangers,” themes that often show how world powers silence another people or culture when they “discover” them. The



life of this culture, it is often assumed, begins and has significance only through this contact, and it signifies only from this point on. This attempt to silence a people's past also poses a threat to their continued unfolding, and Wiebe exposes the assumptions that pervade the Franklin expedition's approach to the Tetsot'ine. Likewise, Wiebe takes up the theme of "strangers" in this context as he shows how seeds of estrangement are sown through the "discovery" by the Franklin expedition of the Tetsot'ine. Through *A Discovery of Strangers*, Wiebe unpacks these loaded terms through the perspectives of characters Keskarrah and Birdseye, as well as in his portrayal of the relationship between Greenstockings and Hood, suggesting that home-making neighbourliness can be possible only if when strangers meet the tension that difference creates is honoured. In honouring this tension, Wiebe's historical fiction is not written to "aid in the systemic creation of a collective mythology" to serve a "nation-building purpose" as some historical fiction did in the second half of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries (Wyilie 6). Both Wiebe's and Laurence's stories of the meeting between people of British cultures and First Nations resist Canadian nation-building based on an erasure of difference. Rather, they participate in what Herb Wyile argues is essential: "a new set of narratives that reflect a much more diverse, and not necessarily unified, society" (6).

Besides complicating a simplistic sense of unity through efforts to absorb the "strangeness" of another culture, each of these stories explore the inner life of individual characters in ways that further multiply heteroglossia. Robert Hood

(*Strangers*) is confused, isn't always attentive to the differences between himself and Greenstockings; he dreams he shoots a wolf and wakes full of regret, wondering how he could have done that. The competing voices within characters recalls M. M. Bakhtin's claim that heteroglossia includes the worldviews that compete within one consciousness, includes the wash of emotions. In each story, human vulnerability is evoked - individual characters are not sufficient or complete in themselves, and this opens up the possibility of dialogue between these characters and the reader. Neither is alone in their vulnerability, and the dialogue that emerges from this context opens the possibility for mystery, for openness across difference. This interactional approach to difference is evoked in the relationships between characters. Greenstockings and Hood do not help one another find a way of being because they speak the same language – they rely on other communication. Likewise, Morag and Jules (*Diviners*) represent the beginnings of conciliation, of consolation not because they both speak English, but because between them they carried and began to break the hard silences that marked the ground of their growing up years in Manawaka.

These stories challenge the illusion that one culture or character can represent itself or another as “finalized,” hermetically sealed and impervious to another. This challenge is important because it affects the possibility of conciliation, or the work of becoming accountable, response-able to another. Retaliation suggests dynamics that perpetuate violence against another and Eden Robinson takes up this theme, showing how it is enacted so quietly through the

heavy silence around and the insidious violence of a sexual predator among the Haisla youth in Kitamaat circa 1960s. Her portrayal opens up the subject of how First Nations and Métis children were sexually abused in residential schools as well as “how Aboriginal communities protect their own pedophiles – their own children hunters” (Van Camp, “Living” 300). Robinson transforms the mentality of retaliation – “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” – by telling the story through the vulnerable but strong voice of the adolescent Lisamarie.

Through her character Christie, meanwhile, Margaret Laurence takes up the illusion of self-sufficiency created through the silence of the Scots immigrant townspeople, and shows the cost of this illusion in their desire to bury and to keep hidden from view their own fragmented selves as well as the fragments of the rightful place of the Métis in the history of their prairie settlement. Through the voices of individual characters each of these texts takes up a particular silence and breaks it open, revealing an array of voices and languages and cultures:

Haudenosaunee, Haisla, Tetsot'ine, Métis, nineteenth-century English explorers' languages, small prairie town Scots immigrant voices, voices of class, of different generations. In this proliferation of voices, the heteroglossia that is always already in each of these stories' settings is evoked and adds to what becoming at-home means for internally exiled First Nations and displaced Métis, as well as for the relationship between First Nations and settler communities. While these stories importantly break particular silences, they also point to another aspect of the unspeakable: the untranslatability of cultures, the integrity of each culture, the

“strangeness” that is sustained and that continues, and that demands respect and humility. This respect and humility that is open to the unfolding of the relationship between two cultures and that is grounded in mystery evokes a spirituality that challenges some of postcolonial theory’s assumptions.

### **Postcolonial “a-words” Revisited Through a Story-Soaked Spirituality**

The relationship between culture, spirituality and stories is important to the discussion of the meeting of First Nations and settler cultures. When the “a-words” – cultural authenticity and appropriation – are used in the context where power is only seen in terms of power-over can the possibilities of a story-soaked spirituality even be explored? My reading of the fictional texts in this dissertation is informed by *but not based on* First Nations spirituality. It is a reading that I make from an intersection: where a First Nations recognition of numinous presences, a Creator, and the understanding that the earth impels humans’ respect and care intersects with my own description of the Mystery that points humankind beyond itself. This intersection from which I read challenges Len Findlay’s assumption that spirituality is an exclusively First Nations domain, that spirituality is a “problem...for the non-Aboriginal supporter of Aboriginal causes” (Findlay, “March” 5). Findlay, whose work in cultural studies corresponds closely with Sakej Henderson’s work on the philosophical foundations of Western jurisprudence, argues that “for Henderson, spiritual allegiance is an inalienable Aboriginal right and tradition...[and] must be respected rather than appropriated

or dismissed” (“March” 5).<sup>93</sup> *Can* it be assumed that spirituality is a problem for all “non-Aboriginal supporters of Aboriginal causes,” that non-Aboriginals do not practice (various) kinds of spirituality? Is dialogue between Indigenous and Christian traditions and spirituality possible? One of the claims this thesis makes is that an essential characteristic of becoming at-home is mystery that it is associated with the undertaking of journeying-with. Cultures cannot do without one another. Being open to mystery and not being closed- minded may help humans from different perspectives listen to one another as each walk on the same earth.

A dialogue between people of different spiritual traditions opens up many new possibilities. For example, Cree theologian Ray Aldred’s claim that the Biblical narrative must be retold from the framework of Indigenous knowledge - one that uses the medium of story – is an important challenge to the doctrine shaped, truth-as-a-set-of-propositions understanding of this narrative. Aldred’s critique of this rationalist approach resonates with the Biblical narrative itself, since it was passed on for thousands of years as so many stories of that particular oral tradition. In “From I-Hermeneutics to We-Hermeneutics: Native Americans

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<sup>93</sup> Despite the fact that he identifies himself as being outside of the realm of spirituality, Len Findlay notes that “orders of ecology...orders of the self-regulating market...[the] just order produced in democratic societies...the...benevolent order of the social relations of production in post-revolutionary worker states....[are] articles of faith and idioms of aspiration [that] characterize all versions of our national (or transnational) imaginary” (“Long March” 6). “Articles of faith” is explicitly the language of spirituality. Findlay’s connection between “faith” “aspiration” and “national or transnational imaginary” I think are crucial. The faith that captures the imagination provides a reservoir of hope as it helps a community envision an alternative or reorient itself in the wake [or face] of a dominant story.

and the Post-Colonial,” Cherokee scholar Jace Weaver distinguishes between the stories of the “modern West,” “ancient Israelites” and Indigenous peoples when he speaks of the worldviews that are inherent to each of them. He argues that “Native worldviews are, in fact, much closer to the worldview of the ancient Israelites than that of the modern West” and he quotes Stan McKay (Cree), former moderator of the United Church of Canada: “We (Natives) like them (the Old Testament people), come out of an oral tradition which is rooted in the Creator and the creation. We, like Moses, know about the sacredness of the earth .... Our creation stories also emphasize the power of the Creator and the goodness of creation” (18-19). Weaver argues for a “biblical witness” in which “something [of the Biblical narrative] ... finds ordinary people where they live their lives” (19). It is “not the hermeneutics of professional exegetes....[but] rather the folk theology upon which Christianity at the ground level has always thrived as a living faith”; Weaver continues by discussing how each culture appropriates the Biblical narrative, that this is a part of what “goes on in the lives of ordinary Christians anywhere in the world” (19). These kinds of “appropriations” are crucial, as ancient stories are taken up so that a rereading may be fruitful for reimagining what it means to be at-home on earth and between human cultures. Taiaiake Alfred, for example records how Nuxalk leader Sximina translates the Biblical narrative from ‘where she lives her life,’ by reading her traditional territory as holy land (192) where the Creator has placed her people, and Cherokee writer Diane Glancy speaks of how “the Bible is full of journeys. It’s why I think

it is home” (“Sun Dance” 121). In relation to her experience as an outside observer to a Sun Dance, she writes of how a storm and the two rainbows she sees afterward bring her to “feel the oneness with the sky and earth. I feel survival. I feel promise. *I feel what I hadn’t known I’d been looking for.* Significance” (121-122 emphasis added).

Rather than reading the way one story soaks into another in a context of power-over appropriations, is it possible to respect the mystery of a becoming at-home where one cannot even articulate what that might mean? Glancy’s experience that “I feel what I hadn’t known I’d been looking for” recalls Flannery O’Connor’s description of the fiction writer whose characters “*act on a trust beyond themselves* – whether they know very clearly what it is they act upon or not.” Just as a language – a cultural homestead - rooted in a specific place and developed there over time - is at a certain point untranslatable, so the deepest spiritual longing often cannot be articulated. The multitude of voices that story gives expression to is a response to this untranslatability and this inarticulate longing, retaining the mystery that this heteroglossia is testimony of.

### **A Rightful Place: Possibilities for Further Collaborations and the Imperative of Literary Citizenship**

Now is the time to heal and to return to the land and reclaim our rightful place and to meet my family that has been sent all over the four winds. We need to come together as Big Bear wished. (Yvonne Johnson, *Stolen Life* 8)

The collaboration between Rudy Wiebe and Yvonne Johnson in *Stolen Life: the Journey of a Cree Woman* (1998) is a sign of the possibilities for respectful dialogue between people of First Nations' and settler cultures. Yvonne Johnson, member of the Red Pheasant Cree nation in Saskatchewan and great-great granddaughter of mistahi-maskwa, or, Big Bear, tells how although she had "seen it many times," she did not wish to read Rudy Wiebe's *The Temptations of Big Bear*, since "what do any of those White people or history really know of my family?" (8). Later, she writes to Wiebe that she is "glad she read [his] book" and that she would like his help as she traces her family history through contacting her family in order to "get a better understanding which is in the minds of the old folks that are left alive on the rez. And I fear I lose one every day I am" in the Prison for Women in Kingston, Ontario (8).<sup>94</sup> Johnson points to the silence that she fears will deepen as she has "lost too many [relations] already" because they have died; these relations carry with them "the info I [Johnson] needs to get a better understanding which is in the minds of the old folks that are left alive on the rez" (8). It is memory, understanding and stories that Johnson fears "will all be lost. I'm scared of the great loss that will be; I can't let it die" (8). She highlights the urgent need for this tracing, contacting of relations and gathering of stories by Indigenous communities. Johnson articulates a theme in Chapter Two: the need to gather stories that break a particular silence by establishing one's place in the

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<sup>94</sup> Of the several people involved, only Johnson was accused and found guilty of a murder, and in this collaboration she describes the multi-layered realities that shape the context of this event. The opening quotation of this section is from a letter that initiates her collaboration with Wiebe.



generations: a genealogy broader than the one imposed by those who dominate. In “The Ethical Space for Engagement,” Cree scholar Willie Ermine speaks of the need for “funding and national commitment [to enable] Indigenous institutions and community to do memory work on knowledge that would inform the rights agenda” which Johnson, for example, is engaged in (202). Ermine argues convincingly that this funding and national commitment will go a long ways to help create an ethical space within which First Nations and immigrant communities can begin to build understanding, helping “to create a level playing field where notions of universality are replaced by concepts such as the equality of nations” (202).

This establishment of a “rightful place” is crucial and also cannot be separated from how those who continue to migrate to this land need to be welcomed. The “human-to-human dialogue” must include the obligation for every settler - whether here for generations or arriving on this land today – to recognize the rightful place of First Nations, Métis and Inuit in this land. This relationship – of being guests to Indigenous hosts - presents itself as a new layer in the story of newcomers’ lives. The development of a rightful place and an ethical space calls for knowledge of the First Nations, Métis and Inuit stories that have soaked this land, and through which they imagine and envision this land. The federal powers-that-be are obligated to invite settlers to reimagine themselves *here* through the witness of Indigenous communities and to orient their arrival in terms of these stories and histories. The stories that carry the memory of an Indigenous

peoples so that it is a vital part of contemporary dialogue, the narratives that reflect the diversity and the differences, and the creative tensions that the stories and the narratives create: these have the power to help settlers begin to imagine and reimagine themselves in this shared land. As each story builds the complexities of the communities and the history of the relations between them into sharper focus, the reader - immigrant or Indigenous - is invited to a wider and deeper sense of this time, this place, who we are here, and who we are not. Early on this thesis referred to the vital connection between activism and stories and in this context this connection remains a potent one: the question of how one is to live depends on which story one chooses to orient oneself by.

## **Coda**

Through stories that take up particular silences and that break them open the work of becoming at-home remains crucial. As I write, news headlines report that “fragile marshes face new threat” because oil is spilling out from a ruptured British Petroleum-dug well 5,000 feet below the surface of the Gulf of Mexico (Kaufman and Robertson). I write as this oil spreads its poisons, silencing who knows how much of the eloquence of the intricate households of those waters and coastal lands? Each of the many factors that contribute to this disaster is another manifestation of human disregard for the diversity, the glossae<sup>95</sup> of earth-home.

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<sup>95</sup> Glos-sae (noun, plural): Anatomy. the tongue. Dictionary.com Unabridged  
Based on the Random House Dictionary, © Random House, Inc. 2010. 3 May 2010. Web.

This deafness – of having ears but not listening - damns not only non-human creatures to silence but also the mother tongues of peoples whose ... knowledges have not been counted as important by the powers-that-be. J. Edward Chamberlin argues that these powers work out of a particular notion of progress and he makes the important link between this idea's disregard for both the non-human and human environments:

Why not let things take their natural course and encourage the survival of the fittest language? What would be lost, other than a few species?

Admittedly, there aren't that many species of languages, but there are lost of varieties...within each family; and some of them...might eventually become new species if the conditions were right. The trouble is that the "right" conditions are often the product of force....The language that wins out is sometimes the one with the army. And we know that while some languages survive all sorts of violence, some do not. And others just slip away, less counted than spotted owls. (16)

As I have pointed out through Taiaiake Alfred and Walter Brueggemann, nothing short of a spiritual revolution will change the dominant desire to live on this earth in power-over relationships bent on muffling and then silencing the heteroglossia that expresses and sustains this life.

I introduced this dissertation with the sung lament of one exiled by the ancient Babylonian empire and ended the third chapter with Sákéj Henderson's

account of how the singing and drumming of First Nations' people announced the Creator's presence to stretch the bounds dictated by English and French-speaking Canadians at the patriation of the Constitution in 1982. These bounds are also challenged and expanded by Shelley Niro's characters in *It Starts With a Whisper* as they sing a song of liberation on the eve of the five-hundred year anniversary of Columbus's stumbling onto the Caribbean islands. Margaret Laurence's youngest diviner Pique joins these voices as she takes up her Métis father Jules' songs of witness. Rudy Wiebe's Tetsot'ine character Greenstocking listens as Robert "Hood's sound plays a skipping harmony over her father's chant, carrying her even farther into the birth of humanity" (89). All of these songs are sung in the presence of powers much larger than that of the singers.<sup>96</sup>

Some may say that these are only songs and that "a song does not change reality" (Brueggeman, *Prophetic* 18). Some may also say the stories told here by Niro, Robinson, Wiebe and Laurence are only fictional stories. However, these songs and stories are part of "the battle for language" as they challenge the language of the dominant powers, evoking alternative realities to the ones in force

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<sup>96</sup> Shelley Niro's feature film *Kissed by Lightning* also employs song to challenge the boundaries set by American and Canadian nation building. The Haudenosaunee main character Mavis Dogblood and her partner stop on their journey through her peoples' traditional territory in upstate New York for a meal at a roadside bar. The atmosphere is tense and they receive hostile treatment and stares by the white waitress and patrons; and then, an African American man stops at their table to chat. He recalls how "your people helped my people" try to reach free states, and he leads his other three companions – who all together form a gospel quartet - in a song of praise for this relationship between their peoples. This song mediates a powerful counternarrative to the story underlining the hostile atmosphere. An alternative reality "breaks out" in the play of this song of praise. Paul Ricoeur claims that "play is formidable precisely because it is *loose* in the world"; and this song is certainly a formidable force that loosens the grip of the hostility in the restaurant (109).

(Brueggeman 18).<sup>97</sup> The “critical and creative dimension” that the language in these stories and songs offers includes a “disclosure of possible worlds,” directing the imagination of the reader to “a disclosure of possibility” and opening up “an understanding of the worlds, actual and possible” (Ricoeur, “The Poetics”125). These songs and the fictional texts point to the heteroglossia that expresses the mystery of life on earth. Stories have the power to help their listeners imagine in new ways the relationships that sustain life on earth; they are able to break silences and create in their listeners a longing to hear voices beyond the tired self-contained voice of self-promotion and the jingoism of political or commercial empires. Stories have the power to open their listeners’ ears to begin to pick up the resonance of the other voices that would break out if through listening one but steps back, is still, and seeks the power that stays.

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<sup>97</sup> Neal McLeod argues that “thinking poetically” allows Cree the “space to recreate....the narrative thinking of the greatest of our kêhtê-ayak, Old Ones, and our storytellers” since “this metaphorical discourse composed of symbolic and poetic descriptions of the world and our experiences, saturates and permeates Cree narrative memory” (109).

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