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Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach* (2000) as Multi-Narrative: The Dialogic Relation of Indigenous and Western World Views

Abstract: *This essay addresses the need to decolonize regimes of knowledge which claim universal and timeless validity. The multinarrative structure of Monkey Beach interweaves Western trauma narrative and Indigenous survival narrative. As a literary manifestation of an Indigenous worldview, the novel engages in knowledge formation as a dialogic process that puts in relation competing yet at the same time entangled views of the world. The text's structure challenges the predominance of Western knowledge production by presenting Indigenous knowledge as more localized, yet at the same time more encompassing than Western scientific approaches. The novel questions the culturally restrictive force of dominant, normative, medically and psychologically defined notions of individual and collective well-being and thus presents decolonization as a process that ensures not only the survival of indigenous cultures but also that of humankind in general.*

1 Introduction: Juxtaposition of Western and Indigenous World Views

Most critics of Eden Robinson's 2000 novel *Monkey Beach*¹ in some way or other comment on the protagonist's in-between position between mainstream Canadian and indigenous Haisla culture. Sonu Purhar, for example, notices an opposition between "the ideologies of [the young protagonist's] modern Canadian upbringing" and "the often discordant beliefs of her First Nations heritage" and considers "the juxtaposition of Lisamarie's proximity to, and alienation from, the Haisla spiritual world" as the central theme of the novel (37). Other critics also focus on juxtaposition as the central thematic or structural principle in the novel (Andrews; Lane; Soper-Jones).

In the text, the competing world views are manifest most prominently in the characters' differing views on ghosts and spirits. The presence of

1 All references to this novel will be given as *MB*.

ghosts squarely puts the action in the realm of the supernatural and thus foregrounds the dividing line between Western knowledge which is based on empirical evidence and Indigenous knowledge which views the relation between human beings and their natural environment in a holistic manner. The Haisla community in the novel is divided on this issue, which suggests that within the Indigenous community mainstream and Indigenous traditions co-exist in a state of tension. The conflict is manifest in the text through the juxtaposition of passages which present the fictional world from the viewpoint of the young narrator-protagonist, Lisamarie Hill, and sections which present knowledge – for example, on the history of the Haisla, or the human heart – from an authorial, seemingly objective viewpoint. At the opening of the novel, the protagonist finds herself in an emotional crisis after her younger brother has gone missing at sea. Lisamarie decides to go looking for him at Monkey Beach, a place where they went as children to look for the mythical B'gwus, a creature half-human, half-wolf. Stories of this creature hold a special place in the community, and as a child, Lisamarie actually had a face to face encounter with the mythical creature. As far back as she can remember, she has been visited upon by supernatural beings, most often by “a little dark man with bright red hair” (MB 18). With time, Lisamarie comes to realize that the appearance of this spirit means that she can foresee death.

The narrative progresses on two time levels alternating between the present and episodes from the past in which Lisamarie's uncle and grandmother figure prominently as mentors who introduce Lisamarie to Haisla culture. The reconstruction of Lisamarie's past life marks an inner process, which comes to completion at Monkey Beach when the protagonist interacts with spirits and is granted a vision in which her brother's death is revealed to her. The vision indicates that Lisamarie has embraced the spiritual tradition of the Haisla and comes to feel “deeply comforted knowing that magical things were still living in the world” (MB 316).

The presence of ghosts and spirits which are presented as real has led critics to subsume the novel under categories such as the Gothic or magic realism. However, as Jennifer Andrews argues, *Monkey Beach* completely inverts Gothic conventions: “Robinson's text [...] forcefully critiques the traditional association of Aboriginals with what is monstrous. [...] *Monkey Beach* provides a rich starting point for rethinking what such a

juxtaposition of concepts might mean [...]” (21–22). Taking a cue from such scholarly comments on the use of juxtaposition in *Monkey Beach*, the following analysis will show that this structural device is used to create a ‘multinarrative,’ a narrative that is double-coded and draws on both the Western Gothic as well as Indigenous story-telling traditions to represent knowledge that is particular to Indigenous cultures. Eden Robinson’s novel *Monkey Beach*, I argue, performs a reconnection with and a creative reinvention of Indigenous knowledge in the medium in which Indigenous knowledge is traditionally transmitted: storytelling. In contemporary Indigenous culture, stories do not only transmit a fixed corpus of traditional Indigenous knowledge but, more importantly, they perform the decolonization of Indigenous cultures and thus attest to the survival of Indigenous cultures: “Stories in Indigenous epistemologies are disruptive, sustaining, knowledge producing, and theory-in-action. Stories are decolonization theory in its most natural form” (Sium and Ritskes II).

2 The Concept of ‘Multinarrative’

In general terms, ‘multinarrative’ can be defined as an artifact (textual, visual, auditory, but also multimodal) that consists of more than one narrative. Two basic principles are constitutive of a multinarrative: juxtaposition – the arrangement of more than one narrative on a horizontal axis – and superposition – the hierarchical relation that exists between different communicative levels of narratives. Juxtaposition implies the syntagmatic combination of equivalent narratives and is typically marked by gaps between paragraphs, episodes, chapters, parts. These gaps constitute the boundary by which the elements juxtaposed emerge as distinct entities. Superposition refers to the hierarchization of narrative levels and thus implies a struggle for control and dominance. The most typical manifestation of superposition are framing techniques that range from the embedding of characters’ discourse in narrator’s discourse to the embedding of one narrative within another. Such hierarchical relations between narrative levels are central to Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of “dialogicity” or “the dialogic,” which is based on the idea that the novel does not merely reflect but also enact social struggles. “The dialogic” – in contrast to monologue – is thought of as social viewpoints competing with each other (259–75).

Rupert Wegerif has adapted Bakhtin's concept to pedagogy and refers to a "dialogic space" that "opens up when two or more perspectives are held together in tension" (12). Indigenous scholars of pedagogy and philosophy use similar concepts to characterize the particularity of Indigenous world views and to highlight the cultural difference between Western and Indigenous knowledge formation. Willie Ermine's concept of "ethical space" allows for the dialogue of two distinct forms of knowledge that contradict and compete, yet at the same time are in relation with each other:

The space is initially conceptualized by the unwavering construction of difference and diversity between human communities. These are the differences that highlight uniqueness because each entity is moulded from a distinct history, knowledge tradition, philosophy, and social and political reality. With the calculated disconnection through the contrasting of their identities, and the subsequent creation of two solitudes with each claiming their own distinct and autonomous view of the world, a theoretical space between them is opened. (195)

In their study *Indian from the Inside: Native American Philosophy and Cultural Renewal*, Dennis H. McPherson and J. Douglas Rabb suggest that Indigenous philosophy is built on "polycentrism":

This perspective, this polycentrism, recognizes that we finite human beings can never obtain a God's-eye view, a non-perspectival view, of reality, of philosophical truth. Every view is a view from somewhere. Hence it follows that no one philosophical perspective can ever provide an entirely adequate metaphysical system. [...] no one perspective can contain the whole truth. (20)

Indigenous concepts such as "ethical space" and "polycentrism" suggest that an awareness for the limitations of any one world view is an integral part of Indigenous culture. The multinarrative structure of *Monkey Beach* can thus be thought of as the literary manifestation of an Indigenous world-view in which knowledge formation is seen as a dialogic process that puts in relation competing yet at the same time entangled views of the world. By engaging Indigenous and Western knowledge in a critical dialogue, the multinarrative performs a decolonizing move as it challenges the predominance of Western knowledge production by presenting Indigenous knowledge as more localized, yet at the same time more encompassing than Western scientific approaches.

3 Juxtaposition and Superposition of Western and Indigenous Knowledge Formations

In *Monkey Beach*, the multinarrative takes shape even before the novel proper begins. In the paratext, typographical section breaks (consisting of three waves) separate passages from each other and establish juxtaposition as a structural principle. The dedication “for Laura Robinson and Dean Hunt *in dreams I hear you laughing and know that you are near*” introduces readers to dreaming as a form of perception that puts the dreamer in touch with the dead or with spirits, something that from a Western rational point of view can only be interpreted as a subjective projection of the dreamer. The ensuing epigraph presents a Haisla proverb and thus draws explicitly on Haisla wisdom and traditional knowledge: “*It is possible to retaliate against an enemy, But impossible to retaliate against storms.*” The proverb’s ‘message’ that nature is beyond human control provides a general frame for the novel. Even before the novel opens, the reference to dreams and the Haisla proverb establish an Indigenous voice, a discourse of Indigeneity (cf. Graham and Penny 4), as a context and meta-discourse for the fictional narrative that follows.

Similarly, the opening of the novel proper relies on juxtaposition to relate Indigenous knowledge and mainstream culture. The first section introduces the protagonist Lisamarie Hill as a first-person narrator who finds herself in a state of transition between sleeping and waking:

Six crows sit in our greengage tree. Half-awake, I hear them speak to me in Haisla.

“*La’es*, they say. *La’es*, *la’es*. [...]”

La’es – Go down to the bottom of the ocean. The word means something else, but I can’t remember what.” (MB 1)

In the ensuing conversation, the protagonist’s mother devalues her daughter’s suggestion that the birds speak to her:

“Clearly a sign, Lisa,” my mother has come up behind me and grips my shoulders, “that you need Prozac.” (MB 3)

In nuce, two different conceptions of what counts as knowledge are manifest here. Lisamarie’s suggestion that the birds have spoken to her can be taken as an expression of Native spirituality, the mother’s response – even if it is made tongue-in-cheek – reflects the mainstream position that a belief

in ghosts and spirits does not hold up to the standards of rationalism and thus calls for medical or psychological treatment.

At this point, a section break interrupts the narrative. The second passage is marked by a distinct shift in theme and point of view:

Find a map of British Columbia. Point to the middle of the coast. Beneath Alaska, find the Queen Charlotte Islands. Drag your finger across the map across the Hekate Strait to the coast and you should be able to see a large island hugging the coast. [...]

Early in the nineteenth century, Hudson's Bay traders used Tsimshian guides to show them around which is when the names began to get confusing. "Kitamaat" is a Tsimshian word that means people of the falling snow, and that was their name for the main Haisla village. So when the Hudson's Bay traders asked their guides, "Hey, what's that village called?" and the Tsimshian guides said, "Oh, that's Kitamaat." The name got stuck on the official records and the village has been called Kitamaat ever since, even though it really should be called Haisla. (MB 5)

A narrative voice here directly addresses a reader who is imagined as foreign to the region and the world of the Haisla. Historical knowledge on the colonization process and the foregrounding of the ways in which Western representational strategies such as naming and mapping were imposed on Indigenous cultures suggest an extradiegetic authorial narrator who is more widely knowledgeable than the young first-person narrator of the first segment. Considering, however, that Lisamarie at a later stage in the novel does present knowledge about the history of Kitamaat and information about the Haisla language, the second passage can be attributed to her as the narrating I who presents a carefully crafted and orchestrated narrative composed after the completion of the events told. From the perspective of the narrating I, the narrator's younger self, the experiencing I, is a potentially unreliable narrator/focalizer on account of her alienation from Haisla culture (cf. also Lacombe 263–64; Appleford 92).

The juxtaposition of the two opening passages draws attention to the cultural in-betweenness of Lisamarie and establishes a metadiegetic level by which Lisamarie's discourse is put on display. The second passage is superimposed on the first and provides a commentary on the thematic focus of both passages, namely the colonial relation between the Canadian mainstream and Haisla culture. Considering the colonial history of North America, the mother's response indicates the alienation of the Haisla from

their cultural traditions. The reference to Lisamarie's inability to understand Haisla supports this reading. It is at this early point in the novel that two competing narratives and two competing knowledge formations begin to take shape. The mother's psychological discourse invokes the mainstream attitude towards supernatural beings: ghosts and spirits exist only in dreams or hallucinations; they are figments of the unconscious. Against the backdrop of the second passage and its thematization of colonialism, however, an alternative narrative suggests itself. Within an Indigenous discourse, dreams and visions such as the ones that tell Lisamarie of the impending death of family members are not so much expressions of unconscious desire than manifestations of a spiritual reality that transcends the material world. When Jo-Ann Archibald in her study *Indigenous Story-Work* expresses her conviction that "dreams can be a source of Indigenous knowledge and that they can provide guidance for Indigenous research methodology" (3), she indicates that dreams and visions are central to constructing Indigeneity as a counter-discourse to Western rationalism with its inherent claim to cultural superiority.

Juxtaposition in *Monkey Beach* foregrounds the self-reflexive quality of the multinarrative, i.e. its tendency to foreground its dual affiliation to both Western and Indigenous knowledge formations. In the following, the focus will be shifted to the aspect of heteroreference and intertextuality, i.e. the text's references to discourses beyond the literary. In this manner, the novel can be situated within a social struggle that is directed against the mainstream's systematic attempts to discredit and ultimately extinguish the Indigenous knowledge systems which the First Nations consider the source of their cultural survival.

4 The Novel in Context: Post-residential School Canada

The novel's most obvious heteroreference is to the residential school experience. Although on the novel's surface this experience seems to play only a marginal role – the protagonist hears bits and pieces about residential school survivors who have difficulties in coping with their lives and managing their anger – it turns out in the end that the residential school trauma has been the motivating force behind the plot. Lisamarie finds a postcard, which suggests that Josh, a friend of their Uncle Mick, raped her brother's

fiancé Karaoke. The postcard shows a photograph of Josh as a child next to a Catholic priest. Karaoke has replaced the original faces with her own and Josh's, thus confronting Josh with the uncomfortable truth that he, the former victim, has turned into a perpetrator. In the vision granted to Lisamarie at Monkey Beach, she learns that her brother Jimmy took revenge and killed Josh, an act that led to his own drowning. The revelations about Jimmy's revenge at the end of the novel turn the residential school experience into a point of origin to which many of the events can be traced.

By means of this heteroreference, the novel participates in the public debate over residential schools, which were operated in Canada by both government and Christian churches from 1876 to 1996. The debate was initiated in 1990 by Phil Fontaine, then Chief of the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs. In an interview with CBC, he spoke of the physical and sexual abuse that he had experienced as a student at a residential school run by the Catholic Church. Although individual cases of abuse had been made public before this event, Phil Fontaine's revelation catalyzed an official investigation, which eventually led to the apology of the Canadian government in 2008. In his response to Prime Minister Harper's apology, Phil Fontaine emphasizes the huge impact that the residential school debate had on Canadian society: "Brave survivors, through telling their stories, have stripped white supremacy of its legitimacy" (Mackey 47). This crisis of legitimacy has empowered Indigenous activists and scholars to challenge the mainstream's authority to decide on matters of concern to Indigenous people for whom the healing of individuals and communities was the most pressing issue. An Aboriginal Healing Foundation was founded to look into the lasting effects of the enforced assimilationist politics. Research into the psychological and social effects of enforced assimilation and psychological and sexual abuse at residential schools has marked an important step in the political struggle for the recognition of Indigenous cultures and the traditional forms of knowledge production and transmission. The claim to decolonize Indigenous knowledge production is closely intertwined with the residential school debate. Dian Million's claim for "Indigenism," for example, is articulated in this context. The function of this discourse

is to define ourselves, rather than be defined. That is an active doing, the imagining and revisioning of an Indigenism that is never, never static. We are constantly eluding frames, and bringing our own knowing with us, carefully parsing our

experiences. It is paramount that we be awake to the potentia, the knowledge in any moment. ("River in Me" 38)

As Million explains, the need for decolonizing Western knowledge formations also affects the trauma discourse which stigmatizes Indigenous survivors as socially deviant. Statistics are used to document the over-representation of Indigenous people in respect to alcoholism, drug abuse, suicide, and domestic violence. Million counters this public image by shifting the perspective to the survival of Indigenous people and the cultural resources which made this survival possible: "Indigenous peoples reached to the life-affirming stories of their enduring experience in these place, these places that are inhabited by our ghosts, our spirits of the potentia, the life force itself" ("River in Me" 40). In this context, Million refers to Indigenous knowledge as "'coming from the heart,' i.e., [...] felt intuitive knowledge rather than any solely rationalized logic" (41, fn. 2). This 'felt' knowledge is conveyed through stories that counter and challenge the way in which 'academic language' represents the residential school trauma.

However, Million does not simply refute the Western academic discourse on trauma. In her view, it has opened a space which allowed the survivors for the first time to give expression to their experience. In speaking out publicly, the survivors needed to break a taboo that is in place in their own tradition, which does not allow for the public exposure of the violence inflicted upon individuals. By her choice of words – survivors rather than victims – Million makes clear, however, that the focus needs to be shifted to the cultural resources and traditions of Canada's First Nations, in particular the ceremonies and rituals of healing that can help individuals and communities to overcome the trauma. In Million's view, "healing is a counter-narrative to *victimization* and is seen as a pathway to *sovereignty* in an emancipation narrative" ("Trauma" 161). In the political struggle for decolonization and emancipation, Indigenous scholars first and foremost resist the individualization of the residential school trauma. "Residential schooling," as Jennifer Henderson points out, cannot be treated as an isolated incident since it is "a project fully continuous with the wider colonial project of dispossession and cultural genocide" (66). Lakota psychologist Maria Yellow Horse Braveheart was among the first to point out that Indigenous people in North America suffer from a historical trauma caused by the effects of colonization

and enforced assimilation (60–76; cf. Castellano). The intergenerational dimension of the trauma requires a communal or “spiritual” approach towards healing in which people make “a connection to something greater than themselves and their individual griefs” (Castellano 26).

Indigenous research on historical trauma and healing is representative of the manifold attempts by Indigenous scholars and activists to reconnect to traditional cultural practices. George Cajete characterizes the core values that Indigenous cultures across North America share:

In contrast to the relatively one-dimensional reductionist NewtonianCartesian [sic] view of Nature, Indians perceived multiple realities in Nature that experienced by our five senses was only one of many possibilities. In such a perceived “multiverse,” knowledge could be received directly from animals, plants, and other living and non-living entities. They perceived that animals and plants have ritual ways of behavior that interact with one another. All life and Nature have a “personhood,” a sense of purpose and inherent meaning that is expressed in many ways and at all times. (*Look* 75)

This notion of a multiverse is based on the assumptions that “the natural environment *was* the essential reality, the ‘true place of being’” and that “Nature is the ground of spiritual reality” (39). This multiverse takes shape in *Monkey Beach*’s multinarrative in contradistinction to the Western trauma discourse which focuses on the effects of trauma on the individual psyche. In the following, I will show how the novel performs the decolonization of the Western trauma discourse and thereby presents Indigenous knowledge as the more encompassing and holistic system.

5 *Monkey Beach* as Trauma Narrative

The novel’s non-linear and fragmented structure and, in particular, its movement towards a surprise revelation at the very end, align *Monkey Beach* with Western trauma narratives as characterized by Roger Luckhurst:

visual and written stories involving trauma have ostentatiously played around with narrative time, disrupting linearity, suspending logical causation, running out of a temporal sequence, working backwards towards the inaugurating traumatic event, or played with belated revelations that retrospectively rewrite narrative significance. (80)

In particular, the last two features are manifest in *Monkey Beach*. Read from the end, the residential school experience is the point of origin, which

provides a connection between many of the events narrated, in particular the numerous manifestations of violence (i.e. the domestic violence to which Lisamarie's aunt is subjected, the sexual abuse of children, the rape of Lisamarie by one of her close friends). Jimmy's disappearance, with which the novel opens, turns out to be the result of the murder he commits in retribution for Josh raping Jimmy's fiancé Karaoke. The act of retribution, however, seems misdirected and tragically futile as Josh's deed can be explained as a result of the abuse that he himself was subjected to as a child at residential school. Josh's behavior illustrates the intergenerational dimension of the residential school experience, which leaves the victims incapable of sustaining relationships. The transmission of the trauma is possible because of the taboo against the public exposure of sexual abuse and violence.

The revelation of the sexual abuse of both Josh and Karaoke in the very end leads to a rewriting of the narrative. Once Josh's history of abuse is revealed, the omnipresence of violence in the community appears in a new light. Against the backdrop of Jimmy's act of retribution, the Haisla proverb at the very beginning "*It is possible to retaliate against an enemy, But impossible to retaliate against storms*" gains significance. In its effects, the residential school experience is compared to a storm, a force against which individuals are powerless. The plot is constructed in such a way as to underline the wisdom of the Haisla proverb. It draws attention to the tragic entanglements that result from the psychological and sexual abuse to which Indigenous children were subjected. The residential school experience is used as a 'synecdochal representation' (Henderson 66) of the much broader historical trauma caused by colonization and enforced assimilation. The protagonist Lisamarie suffers from the traumatic loss of her grandmother and uncle, the two close relatives who taught her about Haisla traditions. Because she shows symptoms such as emotional numbing, indifference to her surroundings and sleepwalking, her parents take her to see a psychotherapist:

Mom picked me up after school, and we went to the hospital [...]. Ms. Jenkins came out and shook Mom's hand, then introduced herself to me. [...] What I tried not to focus on was the thing that was beside her, whispering in her ear. It had no flesh, just tight, thin skin over bones. Its fingers sank into her arms, its legs wrapped around her waist as it clung to her like a baby. [...] I caught a bit of what it was

saying to her. "... screws her? Do you think he thinks of you? When he puts his hand on your thigh, does he imagine hers? Is he –" [...] "Please," Ms. Jenkins said, [...] "Call me Doris." [...] "Do you think," she asked me halfway through our first and last session, "that maybe these ghosts you dream about aren't really ghosts, but are your attempt to deal with death?" "No," I said. [...] "Then you believe ghosts exist?" "Yes," I said. [...] "Are you sure?" The thing unwrapped its arms from Ms. Jenkins and drifted across the room, hovering over me. [...] "Yes," my mouth moving by itself [...]. I couldn't take my eyes from it. "Why?" The thing bent its head, its lips near my ear. "For attention, I guess." "Good, this is good, Lisa." [...] While the thing was feeding, I kept seeing Mick's body as Dad pulled it into the boat, Mick's empty eye sockets in his lipless face, the fishing net embedded in his skin. Words came out of my mouth, ones the thing knew Ms. Jenkins wanted to hear, but I was drowning. I yanked myself away, and the thing fled back to Ms. Jenkins. My heart trip-hammered. [...] "Lisa," Ms. Jenkins said quietly, "I think this was a very good session. I'm sure that with a little work, you'll be back to normal in no time. I'm glad we had this talk." My lips smiled. "Thank you. I feel a hundred times better." (*MB* 272–74)

This scene poses a challenge to Western readers who are tempted to agree with the therapist's thesis that the ghost – or "the thing" as it is referred to by the narrator – is a figment of Lisamarie's imagination. The assumption that the patient suffers from hallucinations as a result of the traumatic losses of her uncle and grandmother complies with both Freudian theory and more recent trauma research. And yet, the scene resists such a reading as it strangely inverts the relation between therapist and patient. 'The thing' feeds on other human beings and thus seems related to B'gwus, the mythical figure of the Haisla about whom Lisamarie has heard stories from her father and grandmother. In the situation, 'the thing' feeds off the fears of the two women. From a Western viewpoint, the novel stands in the Gothic tradition with its long history of representing the unspeakable as ghosts or supernatural forces (cf. Castricano 801). Freud himself drew on this tradition when he first introduced psychoanalysis. He compared the mind of a neurotic patient to a house invaded by foreign elements and explained these ghosts as projections of the unconscious, and as a result of repression (cf. 141–42). Lisamarie's vision of 'the thing' can easily be explained in such a way. The foreknowledge of her uncle's and grandmother's deaths leave her with feelings of repressed guilt that are acted out, for example, in bouts of sleepwalking in which she puts herself in danger thus displaying an unconscious desire to punish herself and to be reunited with the dead. Up to

the moment when she is confronted with the therapist, Lisamarie views the visions and dreams of the 'little man' from a Western rational viewpoint that she has internalized. However, once she experiences that 'the thing' puts her in a position of power – she knows more about the therapist than the latter knows about herself and can thus manipulate her –, her attitude towards spirits and monsters begins to change. Following her therapy session, she “want[s] the thing to feed on [her] again” (*MB* 275), a change of attitude which can be explained by the effect 'the thing' has on Lisamarie: although it puts her in touch with the feelings of guilt she has repressed and that threaten her sense of self – “I was drowning” – it at the same time gives her satisfaction because it helps her to resist and manipulate the therapist.

6 *Monkey Beach* as Survival Narrative: The Resurgence of Indigeneity²

The survival narrative emerges and begins to take shape at this point in the narrative. After the therapy session, for the first time Lisamarie appreciates her foreknowledge: “Until that moment, I had never appreciated the little man. This is, I thought, what it's like for everybody else. Hell, it's bad news. Bam” (*MB* 283). The changed attitude towards spirits and ghosts is anticipated by a scene in which Ma-ma-oo tells her granddaughter that ghosts are nothing to be afraid of: “You don't have to be scared of things you don't understand. They're just ghosts” (*MB* 265). Lisamarie's transformation culminates in the end when she is granted a vision. Upon arrival at Monkey Beach, she offers the spirits her own blood in exchange for information about her brother's whereabouts. Earlier, after her friend Cheese had raped her, the spirits asked her for meat in exchange for revenge on the perpetrator, an offer that Lisamarie ignores at the time. Now, she is granted a vision in which Jimmy's death is revealed to her, but her wish to join her dead relatives and remain in the spirit world is denied. Her grandmother asks her to return to the world of the living. Among the spirits of the dead, Lisamarie comes to embrace Haisla culture which is expressed through her sudden ability to understand the language: “I can understand the words even though they are in Haisla and it's a farewell song, they are singing

2 I borrow this phrasing from Alfred and Corntassel.

about leaving and meeting again, and they turn and lift their hands” (*MB* 373–74). Lisamarie concludes her narrative with words that suggest that “[c]lose, very close, a b’gwus howls – not quite human, not quite wolf, but something in between. The howl echoes off the mountains. In the distance, I hear the sound of a speedboat” (*MB* 374).

Although the reference to the sound of a speedboat reiterates earlier scenes in which the speedboat is associated with Uncle Mick’s death there is no doubt about Lisamarie’s survival. The story itself is proof of that. Her decision to end her narrative with the mythical b’gwus whom she perceives as “not quite human, not quite wolf, but something in-between” indicates that she has reconnected with her traditional culture and uses the mythical story in a way that Ojibwa elder and scholar James Dumont characterizes as follows:

These legends, these myths are [...] no mere childish tales of how a world began, or why human and animal beings have the peculiar features and characteristics they do. Nor are they fanciful explanations for the landscape and the atmosphere being filled with liveliness and strange superhuman beings. Rather, they speak of how meaning and life, that seems of another reality, is brought into the ordinary reality we are born into. ‘They make a home out of the world.’ (39)

If *Monkey Beach* is partaking in the Indigenous tradition of “making a home out of the world” through storytelling, it performs this act in a manner that is similar to Ma-ma-oo’s teaching of traditional knowledge. While Ma-ma-oo explicitly teaches the narrator about plants, animals, or the land, she also conveys traditional knowledge in an indirect way. Many references to Ma-ma-oo’s life style imply that traditional Indigenous nutrition, for example, is healthier than the industrially produced food to be had in supermarkets and restaurants. About Ma-ma-oo’s iced tea, the reader gets to know that it “was always bitter because she hated using sugar” (*MB* 215).

In reviewing her life, Lisamarie comes to re-evaluate the cultural practices and beliefs that her grandmother and uncle performed and believed in. Her change of attitude gives her trauma narrative a distinct shape. In her case, the ghost that seems to haunt her is not primarily a symptom of the traumatic loss of people close to her, but rather an embodiment of the spiritual connection that exists between humans and the natural environment. From the moment when ‘the thing’ gives Lisamarie the advantage over the psychotherapist, the narrative’s concern is with re-connecting Lisamarie to Haisla

spirituality. The inversion of the Gothic tradition not only foregrounds the difference between Western and Indigenous literary traditions, but opens up a space in which the Indigenous story-telling tradition emerges as the more encompassing – because holistic – knowledge system:

[...] a teaching story [...] illustrates the nature of the way Indigenous people viewed relationships with all things, people, animals, the earth, and the sky. [...] The story is [...] about journeying to the center, to “that place that Indian people talk about.” This is a place of spirit within ourselves and in the world as a whole. It is in “that place” that knowledge and gifts of spirit can be obtained. It is a place of vision where one must learn how to seek. (Cajete, *Igniting* 134)

When read alongside Dennis H. McPherson and Douglas Rabb's study on Indigenous philosophy, the transformative agenda of the text comes into clear focus. The status of ghosts and other supernatural beings in Lisamarie's narrative are representative of a holistic Indigenous worldview. “[T]he intimate relationship between land and person” (McPherson and Rabb 87), on which all Indigenous cultures in North America are founded, is the most important insight that the protagonist/narrator gains once she disentangles her perception of ghosts and spirits from the Western conviction that the belief in supernatural beings indicates a primitive stage of cultural development.

The most important carrier of traditional knowledge is Grandmother Ma-ma-oo who is aware of the precarious state that the Indigenous cultures are in: her TV consumption, for example, illustrates a creative adaptation to mainstream culture. Her acceptance of these new forms of storytelling, however, does not affect the fundamental beliefs of her culture. When telling her granddaughter about the origins of human existence, she refers to a time when there was no distinct boundary between human beings and animals. She tells a version of the b'gwus narrative according to which the latter personifies a man who was murdered by his wife and her lover and turned into a b'gwus to take revenge on his wife and brother. The significance of the story is left open, and Ma-ma-oo suggests that the meaning might have been lost to the Haisla as most of them do no longer speak their language: “to really understand the old stories, she said, you had to speak Haisla” (*MB* 211). Although this remark self-reflexively comments on the fact that Robinson's novel – written in English – is itself a manifestation of cultural assimilation, it at the same time invokes the ritualistic function of

Indigenous storytelling. The climactic scene at the end of *Monkey Beach* represents a vision quest, an Indigenous ritual that puts the individual in touch with the universe:

When you reach out beyond yourself, all of a sudden you have some tremendous strength and your body suddenly becomes one with the earth, air, fire and water. You don't feel any pain – you're sort of above it. You're pushed to a point where you sense you're a spiritual being [...]. (Macpherson and Rabb 70)

Monkey Beach's survival narrative focuses on such a spiritual transformation. The process ultimately results in Lisamarie's changed attitude towards the 'little man' that has appeared to her since childhood:

Now that I think back, the pattern of the little man's visits seems unwelcomely obvious, but at the time, his arrivals and departures had no meaning. As I grew older, he became a variation of the monster under the bed of the thing in the closet, a nightmare that faded with morning. He liked to sit on top of my dresser when he came to visit, and he had a shock of bright red hair, which stood up in messy, tangled puffs that he sometimes hid under a black top hat. (*MB* 27)

This is the only instance in the novel where Lisamarie directly appears as an authorial narrator who shows herself in control of the narrative and in a position to comment on her younger self. The pattern which she sees indicates her socialization into a mainstream culture in which the presence of ghosts is associated with mental illness. The re-evaluation of the 'little man' in the course of the novel is the result of an Indigenous process of knowledge production. The narrator's presence in the passage indicates that it is the performance of telling her life-story which allows for an alternative pattern to emerge: the seemingly random acts of violence which are reported by Lisamarie turn out to be intertwined with the more comprehensive historical trauma that the Haisla community suffers from as the result of the enforced assimilation in residential schools and the ensuing loss of Indigenous knowledge.

Through the continuous juxtaposition of passages in which Western and Indigenous attitudes towards supernatural phenomena are contrasted, the novel challenges mainstream notions of mental and psychological health. From an Indigenous perspective, "reason, or human cognition, may not be the sole source of knowledge, [...] 'faith and spirit' may also play a significant and alternative role to human reason" (Atleo xii). In the Haisla worldview, the ghosts and spirits that interact with Lisamarie are an integral

part of the natural environment. The ghosts, for example, relate human beings to animals and trees. Grandmother Ma-ma-oo is instrumental in changing Lisamarie's attitude. At one point, she takes her granddaughter to the woods and introduces her to a plant, *Oxasuli*, that when put on the windowsill "keeps ghosts away" (*MB* 151). When she takes some of the plants with her, she performs a ritual:

She broke one of the cigarettes and left the tobacco scattered at the bottom of the cedar trunk. She said some words in Haisla, then she broke off one of the branches. [...]

"You're giving tobacco to a tree?"

"The tobacco is for the tree spirits. You take something, you give something. [...]" (*MB* 152)

When Lisamarie inquires what spirits look like, her grandmother tells her about the 'little man':

The chief trees – the biggest, strongest, oldest ones – had a spirit, a little man with red hair. Olden days, they'd lead medicine men to the best trees to make canoes with. (*MB* 152)

For the first time, Lisamarie is told that she has the gift of knowing the future. However, Ma-ma-oo does not answer Lisamarie's question about the meaning of the spirit's appearances and cautions her granddaughter not to rely too much on the 'little man': "He's a guide, but not a reliable one. Never trust the spirit world too much. They think different from the living" (*MB* 153). The role that Lisamarie's grandmother fulfills closely resembles the teaching of Indigenous elders as characterized by McPherson and Rabb:

Native elders [...] have the reputation of never giving a straight answer. [...] You are given the autonomy, the complex freedom, to discover the relevance of the reply, and hence to work the problem out for yourself. (154)

Knowledge in the novel is transmitted through the performance of Indigenous rituals:

We hung the cedar in her house first and put oxasuli on the windowsills. When we put the cedar up in my room, Dad came up and raised an eyebrow when he saw what we were doing, but he didn't say anything. (*MB* 154)

These rituals help Lisamarie to come to terms with experiences that from a Western point of view are considered as either superstition or hallucination and thus as an expression of psychological disorder.

However, the novel does not simply oppose two knowledge systems. The most obvious break in terms of narrative coherence and point of view occurs with passages that are difficult to place in time or to attribute to a narrative agency. Several times during the novel (*MB* 164, 192, 275), a heterodiegetic narrative voice provides physiological information about the human heart. The following passage is representative:

Behold, your heart. Touch it. Run your fingers across this strong, pulsating organ. Your brain does not completely control your heart. In the embryo, the heart starts beating even before it is supplied by nerves. The electrical currents that ripple across your heart causing it to contract are created by a small bundle of specialized muscle tissue on the upper right-hand corner of your heart. (*MB* 164)

The relation of these passages to the surrounding ones is not at all clear. Considering that Lisamarie's grandmother suffers from a heart attack, there seems to be a contrast between the objective scientific knowledge related in these passages and the metaphorical meaning of the heart as the center of emotions. The scientific knowledge about the heart is completely removed from the characters' lives and cannot explain anything. Rather, the isolated look at the mechanics of the heart draw attention to the vast gap that exists between the abstract discourse of Western medicine and Lisamarie's harrowing story of violence, abuse, addiction, suicide, and rape.

The juxtaposition of passages that are related by a seemingly objective voice and the subjective perceptions of Lisamarie once again create the 'dialogic space' in which competing views are held in tension. While the Western scientific knowledge system is neither dismissed nor devalued as such, it is shown to be "separating the knowledge from all of the context (the relationships, the world views, values, ethics, cultures, processes, spirituality) that gives it meaning" (Simpson 139). In Leanne Simpson's plea for a recognition of the "spiritual foundations" of Indigenous scholarship and her self-characterization as a scholar, the metaphor of the heart plays an important role: "It is only when I sit quietly, patiently, and listen with my heart, that Indigenous paradigms and processes emerge and begin to assume control" (142). A similarly significant overlap between scholarly and literary discourse can be observed between Jo-Ann Archibald's scholarly book on *Indigenous Story-Work* and Robinson's novel. Before Archibald starts explaining the role of storytelling in Indigenous cultures, she relates a

dream, which she interprets as a call “to use the cultural knowledge [of the Stó:lō tribe] and to share it with others, thereby ensuring its continuation”:

I was alone in a canoe and approaching land. [...] As the canoe reached shore, many of the Old People came out to greet me. The Old Ones were those who had ‘passed on,’ or as we say, travelled to the Spirit World. [...] I told them that I wanted to leave that cold place and stay with them. [...] they brought me back outside and put me back in the canoe. They said I had to go back, and that I wouldn’t be lonely anymore, and that I had important work to do yet. (3)

Archibald’s dream very much resembles the ending of *Monkey Beach*. Tempted to give in to the desire to let go and drown at Monkey Beach, the narrator has a vision in which she enters “The Land of the Dead” where she meets the relatives whose death she foresaw but could not prevent. Her grandmother tells her to return to the world of the living, her uncle and brother lead her back. At this point, Lisamarie is the person who has survived historical trauma and has been successful in “making a connection to something greater than themselves and their individual griefs” (Castellano 26).

7 Conclusion

The Western trauma narrative and the Indigenous survival narrative are the two narratives which constitute *Monkey Beach*’s multinarrative. Through juxtaposition and superposition the novel creates an ‘ethical space’ (Ermine), a ‘polycentric perspective’ (McPherson and Rabb), a ‘multiverse’ (Cajete) which allows for a critical dialogue between Western and Indigenous knowledge traditions. Through heteroreference to the residential school experience and the intertextual relation to the discourse on Indigeneity, the novel moreover partakes in the social struggle that Canada’s First Nations have fought to gain autonomy and control over the economic, political, and cultural matters that affect their lives. By foregrounding the telling of the story as an act of spiritual transformation, the novel plays the role that “Indigenous storytelling traditionally plays as resurgence and insurgence, as Indigenous knowledge production, and as disruptive of Eurocentric, colonial norms of ‘objectivity’ and knowledge” (Sium and Ritskes I). The decolonization of Indigenous knowledge is seen as the means by which the survival of Indigenous cultures – and by extension of humankind – can be secured.

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