

Kelsey Sorensen

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It's Not Gothic - It's About the Stories Within the Story

Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach* is the story of a young Haisla woman named Lisamarie whose life is recounted while she searches the physical and spiritual landscape of Haisla culture for her brother who was lost at sea. As her memories begin to unfold, her relationships with ghosts and Haisla tradition grow stronger. After the deaths of her Uncle Mick and her grandmother Ma-ma-oo, she leaves her community and becomes plagued with addiction before returning home to finish school. Throughout her life, she is visited by a little man regularly who warns her when family and friends are going to die. Ma-ma-oo and her parents both tell her stories of the b'gwus (In english known as the Sasquatch), the stone man, and plants like oxasuli. *Monkey Beach* has been analysed as a gothic novel by Jennifer Andrews in her article "Rethinking the Canadian Gothic: Reading Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach*". However, the novel itself is a portrayal of defiant and resilient heroine Lisamarie, whose heritage in the wild landscapes of British Columbia far predates colonization, making this story fundamentally Haisla with an emphasis on tradition and stories; not gothic.

In gothic literature, the heroine of the story is vulnerable and innocent, whereas Lisamarie is tough and defiant from a very young age. Her personality is emphasized when she meets her Uncle Mick: "'You should have named her Agnes, after Mother.' When I scowled at him, he added, 'Cause she's a delicate Haisla flower too'" (Robinson 25). He is being sarcastic, since Lisamarie was so angry at him for making her father cry. Later on in the story, Uncle Mick lovingly gives her the nickname "monster" for sticking up for herself against a bully (Robinson

67). Her resilient and defiant behaviour is praised by her indigenous rights activist uncle, because she is his little Haisla warrior (Robinson 71). In Andrews argument, “However, what is most fascinating and radical about Robinson’s novel is her pointed reversal of the Native as “Other,” which has shaped most previous Canadian gothic texts” (Andrews 223). This statement is extremely misguided, since there is no “reversal of the Native as ‘Other’” (Andrews 223); Robinson purposely wrote from an indigenous perspective because she’s an indigenous author. Canadian gothic literature is written from a colonial perspective, which historically and socially automatically stereotypes indigenous peoples as the exotic and foreign other. To assume that an indigenous author “radically” wrote Lisamarie as a reversal of the gothic heroine, is a choice to hold Robinson’s writing to a colonial standard that doesn’t exist in indigenous storytelling. When Lisamarie’s character is described and emphasized, her Haisla identity is intertwined in her entire being; which indicates that this novel is meant to embody a Haisla story- not a gothic story seen through the eyes of a Haisla woman.

Wild and untamed landscapes which are to be left alone out of fear, are important in gothic themes, while the Canadian landscape is wild; to the Haisla, it is familiar and respected. Andrews argues: “Furthermore, instead of presenting the Gothic as a means of exploring how non-Native characters are haunted by a Canadian wilderness that they find unfamiliar and threatening, Robinson negotiates a space in which her Aboriginal characters can examine the possibilities inherent in connecting to the natural world, monsters and all” (Andrews 212). Robinson doesn’t “negotiate” the relationship her Haisla characters have with the wilderness: it is inherent in her culture to begin with. Robinson provides evidence of this in her novel by establishing knowledge with the reader that the Haisla have always had connection with this land: “Mom leaned over and dipped her hand in the water, then washed her face. After stubbing

out his cigarette, Mick did the same. ‘When you go up to the Kitlope,’ Mom said, ‘you be polite and introduce yourself to the water’” (Robinson 112). Lisamarie’s mother is teaching her a tradition that had already been taught to her and Uncle Mick. This is a relationship between Kitlope and the Haisla people that already exists, and Robinson is sharing this tradition with the reader. She also establishes that Lisamarie’s lineage is being tracked by the location of her grandfather’s traplines, which further ties her to the wild landscape (Robinson 99). As a result, the novel’s portrayal of the Haisla people and their connection to the western coastal wilderness is Robinson’s way of sharing her culture and heritage with her readers; not a “negotiated space” to reverse the gothic theme of fearing the Canadian wilderness.

The stories and the spirituality, which give the story a dark and supernatural style, shouldn’t be compared to gothic literature; as they are representations of the survival of Haisla culture. Gothic literature has supernatural elements, with grisly tales embedded in the bigger story. While *Monkey Beach* has a similar style, it is important to understand that these are real oral traditions of the Haisla culture. In Jodey Castricano’s article “Learning to Talk with Ghosts: Canadian Gothic and the Poetics of Haunting in Eden Robinson’s *Monkey Beach*” she argues: “In fact, in Robinson’s novel, the protagonist turns the tables on the pedagogical dimensions of Eurocentric storytelling by asserting that ‘None of the stories I read in English had anything to do with my life’ (166)” (Castricano 7). Opposite of Andrews’ argument, Castricano is pointing out that Lisamarie actively criticizes English stories as being unreflective of her indigenous experience. To then compare an English genre to *Monkey Beach* is robbing the novel of its purposes: to share Haisla stories that indigenous readers will relate to, and to engage non-indigenous readers in Haisla culture. Robinson emphasizes the importance of Haisla stories with Ma-ma-oo’s character: “‘You’re telling it wrong,’ Ma-ma-oo had said once when she was over

for Christmas dinner. Every time Dad launched into his version, she punctuated his gory descriptions with, 'That's not how it happened.' 'Oh, Mother,' he protested finally. 'It's just a story.' Her lips pressed together until they were bloodless. She'd left a few minutes later" (Robinson 8). Ma-ma-oo is upset with her son for not correctly passing Haisla stories onto his children: if the story gets changed or forgotten, then an aspect of the culture is lost. Similarly with Andrews' argument: by comparing this novel to a gothic narrative is threatening the importance of the oral traditions and the culture that this story represents.

While *Monkey Beach* has elements that are related to gothic literature, it is important to approach Robinson's novel as indigenous literature, and respect that it's a representation of the author's Haisla culture and indigenous experience. This requires the reader to remove the colonial lens, and appreciate not only the political messages, but Lisamarie's defiant portrayal of a modern day Haisla shaman. It's also a glimpse into the incredible world of Haisla spirituality, and the stories which have survived Canada's attempt at assimilating indigenous nations. Andrews article is a reminder that indigenous people are still considered the foreign "other" to most non-indigenous people, and that anything uniquely indigenous must somehow fit a European standard in order to exist. There is hope that this perspective will be forced to change, as more and more indigenous authors write stories that are profoundly and culturally indigenous. Eventually, those stories won't be analyzed as a reversal of the European plot, but rather as a human experience reflecting the stories, language, traditions, and experiences of an indigenous person; which is completely authentic.

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