

# RUMORS OF A LARGER STORY: THE INTERSECTION OF MYSTERY AND MASTERY IN EDEN ROBINSON'S *MONKEY BEACH*

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## **Abstract / Résumé**

Following the tensions between mystery and mastery serves as an approach to Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach*. The novel, set in Haisla territory, demonstrates how mastery in form of (neo-) colonialism manifests itself in many ways, disrupting the webs of life and relationships for community members in multiple ways. In the face of an existence imposed by mastery, mystery is demonstrated in the text as a larger part of the story, in both the narrator's relations with her uncle and grandmother and the inheritance they invite her to receive. This injection of mystery in the story exists as a counternarrative to colonialism, and this article shows how Robinson refuses to let colonialism be the all-defining factor in the lives of her characters by offering an ambiguous portrayal of violence.

L'examen des tensions entre le mystère et la maîtrise sert d'approche au roman *Monkey Beach* d'Eden Robinson. Située sur le territoire des Haisla, le roman démontre comment la maîtrise, sous forme de (néo-)colonialisme, se manifeste et perturbe de diverses manières la toile de la vie et des relations des membres de la collectivité. Dans le contexte d'une existence imposée par maîtrise, Robinson présente le mystère dans le roman comme un élément plus important du récit, à la fois dans les liens de la narratrice avec son oncle et sa grand-mère et dans l'héritage que ces personnages invitent la narratrice à recevoir. Une telle injection de mystère sert de contre-récit au colonialisme et l'article montre comment Robinson refuse de laisser le colonialisme devenir le facteur de définition complète de la vie de ses personnages en proposant une représentation ambiguë de la violence.

Besides the mastery of violent storms, of retaliations both misdirected and murderous, and an unreliable spirit world that severs human relationships, Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach* also portrays a discourse of mystery, the opening up of the dialogue necessary for community and kinship. Even as it tenuously threads its way through the text, mystery serves as a counternarrative to the brutalities that almost overwhelm the young narrator Lisamarie and her entire generation in the Haisla community of Kitamaat. Violence is manifested through a discourse of mastery that seeks to silence all but its own voice. Mastery works through the legacy of racism that has shaped the lives of Lisamarie's parents, uncles, aunts, and grandparents; it becomes insidious through the secrecy that allows a sexual predator to continue to haunt Lisamarie's group of friends. However, this power to disrupt relationships is not just the effect of colonization but is also present in the Haisla origin story of the B'gwus, the "wild man of the woods" so that mastery as a discourse of domination cannot be simply restricted and pinned to European invasion.

A close look at the intersection of mystery and mastery in the novel is important for several reasons. Some postcolonial critiques of *Monkey Beach*, addressed later in this article, associate the violent mastery in the novel solely with colonialism and fix Lisamarie's Haisla community in a pre-contact idyllic past. These interpretations also erase the agency that Robinson gives her characters by suggesting that they are only ever shaped by the colonialism she so powerfully portrays. These assumptions perpetuate a sort of (neo-colonial) mastery that seeks to undermine the way cultures continue to unfold as traditions are reinterpreted in dialogue with contemporary contexts. Thomas King challenges postcolonial theorizing that confines the broad sweep of First Nations cultures and history to the narrow era of their contact with Europeans. He exposes the implicit assumption that fixes First Nations' cultures around the "post" of colonialism, as if these communities have not been continuously reinterpreting their traditions (184-185). This article builds on King's critique, arguing that Robinson's portrayal of violence exceeds the parameters of colonization, past and present. For this reason I will use the rather ambiguous terms of "mastery" and "mystery" in my reading of *Monkey Beach*. Robinson portrays the violent mastery over another and the power of mystery as two forces that have been in tension in the Haisla community long before the arrival of Europeans, and is a tension that continues.

By its nature, mystery, as this article will engage it, is difficult to define. It is not a puzzle that is dissipated when solved. It is not a "who-did-it" so that the "case" can be neatly closed at the end of the day.

Rather, the discourse of mystery is one that is circumstantial only until it discloses itself in a beckoning call and a response of love. This call invites one into a larger story. Robinson opens *Monkey Beach* with a subtitle that suggests such a discourse of mystery: "Love Like the Ocean." It begins with the six crows that instruct narrator Lisamarie in Haisla to "La'es, la'es...go down to the bottom of the ocean" (1). By the end of this part of the novel, the reader knows that this is impossible to do, that the ocean depths are unfathomable: "less than 1/100th of a percent of the deep sea has been glimpsed; astronauts have flown 384,000 kilometers to walk on the moon, but no one has actually set foot on the deepest ocean floor" (125). Robinson implies by her title that love has this unrealizable depth as she ironically juxtaposes the fierceness of Lisamarie's love for her younger brother Jimmy with a feat of human technology. Lisamarie's call to and search for her missing brother begins in this section and frames the entire story – and with it a mystery that intimates a sense of a larger than human power.

Robinson's description of the unfathomable depths of the ocean evokes wonder, an awe that is echoed in Louis Owens's notion of the "delicate equilibrium" of the "carefully, cyclically ordered cosmos" within which humans are placed and towards which humankind shares an "irreducible responsibility" (20). A "delicate equilibrium" makes up this ecological household of which Robinson's characters are also a part. Lisamarie finds solace and strength in the traditional relationships that the Haisla have established with this particular place on earth, relationships to which her beloved Uncle Mick and Grandmother Ma-ma-oo introduce and invite her. Their teachings to Lisamarie are reminiscent of Jeannette Armstrong's assertion in relation to her Okanagan ancestral territory that "the land constantly speaks. It is constantly communicating. Not to learn its language is to die" (176). The delicate equilibrium that makes up this larger household, this land that speaks, calls for a posture of careful and constant listening that is noticeable in Lisamarie, the narrator of the novel.

Reading the novel through the notion of mystery reveals Lisamarie's characterization within a web of relationships both human and non-human. The forces of mastery, on the other hand, seek to destroy relationships. The characters threatened by this force are isolated from any sense that they are part of a larger story. While these forces are multiple, the core narrative of mastery is explicated by Lisamarie, when she recalls how her brother Jimmy left to work for their Uncle Josh, a commercial fisherman. As she explains, only a few days into their trip, the boat disappears, Josh's body is found drifting at sea, and Jimmy is missing. While she waits for news, Lisamarie narrates her life story, of her grow-

ing up in her village, in an attempt to piece together the puzzle of Jimmy's disappearance. In Jimmy's room she finds clues as to why he was so eager to go fishing with their uncle; most specifically a card that a priest sent to Uncle Josh after he had left residential school. It reads: "I remember every day we spent together.... I miss you terribly," signed "Your friend in Christ, Archibald" (365). Lisamarie realizes, with shock, that the priest used his religious status to mask his sexual exploitation of the young Josh. Josh's response as an adult is to become a sexual predator among the young people of Kitamaat village. When Jimmy finds out that his girlfriend is one of Uncle Josh's victims, he resolves to retaliate by murdering Josh on his boat. Jimmy succeeds, but is then thrown overboard as the boat sinks in a gale. Kinship and community are broken by mastery begun in colonialism, of the secrets that have been kept, by the retaliations that were planned, and the cycles of violence perpetrated and repeated.

Mastery works its destruction through isolation. The young Josh is separated from his community through a residential school system that seeks to overpower and erase his culture through assimilation. While there, he is separated from the safety of his parents and grandparents and vulnerable to the sexual abuse of the priest. Returning home, Josh brought back his abuse to individuals of the young generation in the Haisla community, repeating what had been done to him. The secrecy that surrounds Josh isolates this generation further.<sup>1</sup> Jimmy, his nephew, also acts alone, keeping to himself what he has discovered, and unwittingly continues a genealogy of violence as he seeks to retaliate in a way that isolates and ends his own life. The question one is left with is: does Robinson give this mastery the last word in Lisamarie's narration?

Some scholars seem to answer "yes," attributing this violent mastery under the wide umbrella of colonization. Cynthia Sugars, for example, casts Robinson's depiction of violence onto "the ills of contemporary urban society, a form of Western psychosis that has infected Native peoples in Canada" (79). Sugars' critique implicitly posits Lisamarie's Haisla tradition as idyllic pre-contact society, an essentially pure and healthy body later corrupted by the influences of "the contemporary" and "the urban." Robinson's text, however, challenges this perspective. A violent disruption of relations frames the Haisla origin story of the first B'gwus that Ma-ma-oo tells Lisamarie. This story is about how a "beautiful woman who was having an affair with her husband's brother" attacks her husband:

She lifted her paddle and clubbed him...she used the paddle to hold his head under [the water] until he was still.... But the next day, when the wife and the husband's brother went

back to hide the body, they found large footprints in the sand.... They discovered the man-transformed into a b'gwus-who then killed his adulterous wife and brother. (211)

Ma-ma-oo's story challenges any utopian views that assume that pre-contact Haisla community life was idyllic or harmonious. Obviously, Robinson refuses to confine her descriptions of violence to "the contemporary," "the urban," or to "Western psychosis." As the discourses of mystery and mastery crisscross in her text, Robinson implicitly avoids constructing binaries between a utopia of the pristine past and a dystopia of the contaminated present.

Moreover, and different to scholarly interpretations such as Sugars', Robinson further shows how Haisla culture continues as a participant in both the vital struggles of contemporary life and in urban settings. For example, take the author's portrayal of the influence that Elvis Presley has had on Uncle Mick and Lisamarie's parents. She is named after Elvis's daughter and Mick goes into a depression when Elvis dies. Robinson eschews an ethnocentric focus on "authenticity" through a portrayal of her characters that shows them as part of a media-driven popular culture. In her construction of Lisamarie in dialogue with both a resonant past and a present pop culture, Robinson depicts the mystery of a larger story limited neither by a past existing in some kind of fixed "tradition" nor by a contemporary setting distanced from context and absent of modernity.<sup>2</sup>

Jennifer Andrews argues that the violence in *Monkey Beach* is "primarily associated with Eurocentric interventions in the Haisla community rather than individual Native characters" (4). For Andrews, the events and life of the community are pinned to European colonization; mastery is a force that overpowers and completely stifles all response. This simply does not do justice to Robinson's complex portrayal of human agency and subjectivity in the characters. Uncle Mick, for example, challenges the claim that the brutal manifestation of colonialism determines a character's response for the remainder of their lives. Mick chooses not to allow his own residential school experience to diminish the relationship he develops with his niece.<sup>3</sup> Despite the recurrent pain Mick experiences, manifested in the nightmares of his wife Cookie's racially motivated murder, he does not retaliate nor does he repeat the residential school offenses that have violated him. He refuses to be determined by attempts to silence him, identifying himself as an active agent with "irreducible responsibility" in the delicate equilibrium that make up his life and the world around him.

Mick additionally resists all attempts to stereotype and to simplify his Haisla culture, taking up the image of the 'monstrous' and reinter-

preting it so that the figure of the monster becomes ambiguous...(116). When in grade school his niece Lisamarie refuses to read aloud from “a book that said that the Indians on the northwest coast of British Columbia had killed and eaten people as religious sacrifices,” Mick is delighted (68). Even when she admits being embarrassed by her teacher’s gaze, which made her feel “as if I were mutating into a hideous thing from outer space,” Mick reorients her by placing her in relation to her own mother: “you’re nowhere near as bad [a monster] as your mom was. Now, she was a holy terror...kiddo, you are my favorite monster in the whole wide world” (67). Reclaiming this racist and slanted representation of the past, Mick aligns the image of the “savage” with senses of bravery and justice, refusing to allow this act to silence his niece, and through her, his community. Resistance to this stereotype is a microcosm of how mastery, and the silencing of Haisla worldviews, can be overcome.

The discourse of mystery in Robinson’s story suggests that a delicate equilibrium includes boundaries that protect the particular soundness of relationships portrayed in this text, relationships whose integrity is based on mutual trust. Robinson does not portray these boundaries as restrictive, suggesting rather that when they are trespassed, so is the integrity of the subject – be it an individual character, the Haisla community, or the environment. Robinson juxtaposes the boundaries created through trust with the violence that seeps through and implodes them. This violence is portrayed as insidious and quietly pervasive, like pollution in water. Trust is broken when these boundaries are erased, and the subject is muffled and silenced, unable to continue the relationships that make up its life. The boundary that marked Josh’s integrity is erased and this breaking becomes an “uncontrolled repetition,” to borrow from Mohanty, a genealogy of violence, a mastery that Mick is somehow able to defy (49). While they were alive Uncle Mick and Ma-ma-oo embodied an alternative genealogy for Lisamarie. When at the end of the novel, Lisamarie is half-conscious and being pursued by untrustworthy spirits, what keeps her afloat are her memories of the larger story that they and she together inhabited. Robinson’s portrayal of their relationships with Lisamarie represents what Mohanty might call a “collective effort [that] produces something new” (49). Mohanty explains this as “the fusion of [their] voices” that “leads to possibilities that could not have been created by the effort of an individual” (49). Lisamarie, Jimmy, Mick and Ma-ma-oo engage in a counternarrative as they develop the trust that is part of the mystery that “produces something new”; their “fusion of voices” intersects with the brutal mastery that threatens to undermine and isolate this narrator.

While mastery attempts to simplify the complex relationships that make up the life of a community, mystery allows for the many voices that exist side by side. Such is the case with the many different responses to the residential school experience. Robinson allows the paradox of life in *Monkey Beach*, where violence coexists with relationships developed on trust, and she does not attempt to reconcile the tensions this juxtaposition creates. One of the discoveries that Lisamarie makes for example, is that her beloved Ma-ma-oo was regularly beaten by her (late) husband Sherman, but “instead of sending him away, she sent two of her children [Trudy and Mick] to residential school” (59). This is a revelation to Lisamarie who has regularly watched soap operas with her Ma-ma-oo, and has heard her shouting advice about men to her favorite characters: “‘Lauren, leave him, he’s no good for you! Na’. What a crazy woman...Wah. She’s taking him back.’ She shook her head sadly” (77). This grandmother who religiously keeps up with these “soaps” acts (along with her Uncle Mick) as one of Lisamarie’s spiritual mentors. She, who has a sophisticated knowledge of the plant and sea life in their Haisla territory, is able to guide Lisamarie in the hazards of the spirit world, but ironically could not actively defend herself (and her children?) from her husband. Robinson allows all of the contradictions to exist side by side; it is a story which cannot be contained reductively.

This does not mean that engaging in the discourse of mystery carries no responsibilities with it. The relationships certain characters like Lisamarie have with ecology, for example, represent a land that speaks, that is resonant, and demands respect. While Lisamarie witnesses the way many are violently silenced and as she discovers the terrifying secrets that set the community on edge, she also recalls how she has come to experience through Ma-ma-oo and her Uncle Mick the “world as a resonant whole,” as poet Jan Zwicky calls it in a different context (100). Through Mick and Ma-ma-oo Lisamarie begins her apprenticeship in another part of the mystery that makes up her world: the rhythms of the seasons. 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 a gift (73). Robinson’s description evokes the delight they bring: under their peel “the shoots were translucent green, had a light crunch and a taste close to fresh snow peas” (73). Likewise, Robinson 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)

Lisamarie's pleasure in this world is further described in the oolichan grease which makes the salmonberry stew Ma-ma-oo cooks up "sinfully rich, as thick as cheesecake" (78). The ecological household that Mick and Ma-ma-oo introduce Lisamarie to is part of the larger story, one that speaks of sensuous pleasure and enjoyment. It also encourages a posture and attitude of reverence.

Lisamarie's narrative carries a tone of awe and wonder as Mick and Ma-ma-oo invite her to share in their knowledge of the Haisla creation story and the wisdom gained through their generations-old relationship to their traditional territory. They encourage her to listen to the land speak, to pay close attention to what is beyond oneself in a way that is open to the surprise of the non-human other. This teaching returns just as she is full of despair, almost certain that Jimmy has drowned. Lisamarie allows herself to remember how Jimmy had become enchanted by the land – by this larger story of which they were both a part, according to her Ma-ma-oo's teaching. Jimmy had been engaged in another kind of mastery as, through disciplined practice, he had been training to become an Olympic level swimmer. He associated water with competitive sports: counting seconds, counting degrees of form against another human competitor at swimming meets. When he becomes injured, he is forced to withdraw from the race. When he no longer counts in competitive ways, Jimmy becomes open to the surprise of another kind of water. The unmanageable sea—the waters of Douglas Channel—replaces the chlorinated water contained by the swimming pool, his former habitat. Lisamarie's memory of what Jimmy experiences in water is part of the counternarrative to the brutal legacy of mastery in which he has become enmeshed. It is an encounter of grace, a grace which, in the words of Jan Zwicky, "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 (99-100). Lisamarie recalls that, as they are leaving the place called Monkey Beach, a pod of "sleek black bodies"—orca whales—come alongside their boat and Jimmy jumps in, diving to watch them underwater. Later, when she is searching for him, 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 her portrayal of Jimmy's enchantment and the consolation this lyric memory gives Lisamarie, Robinson evokes a response of wonder at what, in poet Jan Zwicky's view, is the "mystery of what-is: the order of the world.... It is...resonant. The world's resonance is its integrity" (95). The relationship between Jimmy the swimmer in love with water and the life of the water gains an entirely new resonance as Lisamarie witnesses its call and Jimmy's response. Just as there is no explanation in the larger story that can make sense of what Uncle Josh experienced in residential school, or of how Josh in turn exploits Jimmy's girlfriend, so the mystery that deepens relations also cannot be explained, but only accepted and welcomed.

Because humans are expected to be active agents in Robinson's text, enchantment should be distinguished from magic. Robinson does use the term, "magic" and "magical," but less in the way magic is often understood and more in the way this chapter understands enchantment. While magic often carries the connotations of being under a spell, a mastery that creates a kind of involuntary immobility that reduces human ability to respond, enchantment suggests that a human is freed to co-respond with the life of a particular place. Jimmy's response evokes the sense of a glad reunion, a homecoming, even if one was not conscious of being "out of place." Eden Robinson describes this kind of enchantment as another layer in the complicated context of Jimmy's life. To borrow Zwicky's expression, the "scales fall from" Lisamarie's brother's eyes when he dives into the waters of Douglas Channel (99). This enchantment takes Jimmy beyond his own failures, beyond himself in a way that is open to the surprise of the other.

The discourse of mastery, on the other hand, provokes disenchantment and erases the awe that is a response to the call of the land that speaks through such delicate equilibriums. Mastery is manifested as humans imagine themselves above the ecological household, when humans claim a "scientific objectivity" that separates science from its very human practice. An acknowledgment of interdependence and the respect that it calls for is erased by a discourse of mastery. The violent rupturing of the relationships within *Monkey Beach* is also manifested in the regional-historical context of Robinson's text, accounting for the many displacements in the life and livelihood of the Haisla, Cheslatta and Nuxalk First Nations.

With this in mind I turn to how the discourses of mastery and mystery also intersect in the geographic and historical context in which Robinson sets *Monkey Beach*. Eden Robinson gives visceral descriptions of the violence that silences members of the Haisla community in

Kitamaat and these radical displacements are repeated in the actual circumstances that polluted and displaced coastal and inland non-human as well as the Haisla, Nuxalk and Cheslatta T'en communities. The advent of Alcan Aluminum in the coastal village of Kitamaat began a massive alteration to the land and to the peoples. These alterations were based on the pride of a modernity that was deaf to the constantly communicating life that had been developed in this region over time. Those who made these massive changes, besides setting themselves up over nature, also neglected to consult with the Indigenous peoples whose life had been shaped by a worldview that called them to seek and to live in respectful dialogue with the non-human life of this region.

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 wreaked havoc in the sophisticated relationships that had developed among the Haisla whose custom and culture were and are tied closely to fishing (Robinson 5). What Robinson does do is highlight the annual harvesting of the oolichan and the making of the oolichan grease (Robinson 85-87).

The Kemano/Kitamaat project that was initiated by Alcan Aluminum supplied the power required to drive the aluminum smelter at Kitamaat. This power 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 wanton displacement did not come to light for forty 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). 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 kilome-

ters north, where they were relocated) for the entire summer. When land was finally purchased for the Cheslatta, moneys were 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. (Wynn xiii)

These then are the details of a discourse of mastery that provides a context for Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach*. In her book *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 home the violence of this mastery over human and non-human communities in her novel. The pollution of the rivers, the continuing restrictions on First Nations fishing in the area and the blatant intimidation by the logging industry are all also implicitly sanctioned by government. Robinson manages to give expression to how this becomes the corruption that seeps through the boundaries that protect the integrity of Lisamarie's relationships.

Mystery in *Monkey Beach* is manifested in sophisticated relationships based on the Haisla culture that is closely tied to fishing. Mastery is manifested in the pollution that muffles the life of the sea as it kills the fish. This has far-reaching consequences as a discourse that brings to an end the relationship between the Haisla and the oolichan, and further jeopardizes the interaction of the Haisla community with other coastal communities as the common practice of making and trading oolichan grease ends. The language made eloquent through the trade, through the balance of relationships between the Haisla and the oolichan, is disarticulated. This legacy of mastery, of one culture lording over another is not over, but continues in many other coastal villages.

To conclude, it is vital to challenge the many manifestations of mastery that try to contain and sever relationships within human communities and between humans and non-humans in the ecological household we share. The novel *Monkey Beach* speaks to such a challenge. At the conclusion of the novel, what saves Lisamarie from being completely isolated and silenced is the beckoning voice of love: she hears her Grandmother, Ma-ma-oo, her Uncle Mick, and her brother Jimmy calling her. They call her into the mystery as their voices remind her that she is part of a community, part of a story larger than this force that seeks to over-

whelm her. Their voices help her to remember their love, her place in the community, and her relations both past and future and in the whole of creation. By listening carefully, she takes up the inheritance they call her to, and she thus participates in the act of continuance for future generations.

Importantly, Robinson's work, as I have uncovered it, reflects and engages current socio-political situations and solutions too. Lisamarie's counternarrative to the force of violent mastery recalls counternarratives engaged by Native leaders such as Sximina of the Nuxalk peoples around Bella Coola, approximately two hundred kilometers south of Kitamaat. In *Wasase: Indigenous Pathways of Action and Freedom*, Taiaike Alfred records an interview with Sximina, a leader 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 in community 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 favor that the government shows the logging industry, allowing it to override the peoples' spiritual life and culture.

The opposition is not confined to political impositions and decree but also includes the powerful lure of the lie that financial success will answer the peoples' spiritual needs. In order to keep their logging jobs and succeed financially, the people were told they needed to turn their backs on the inheritance that had been part of their culture for generations. After the Nuxalk failed to save some 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 Nuxalk loggers to go out there...told [them]: '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). This malevolent exercise of mastery reaches beyond the systemic privilege given to industry, cutting to the very roots of their traditional spirituality.

And yet, the discourse of mystery that runs through Sximina's narrative does not suggest that mystery—the larger story—can be contained by any one spiritual practice. 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 grounded in both the Nuxalk tradition of the sacred as well as other spiritual beliefs: “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). Her reading has influenced her worldview so that a part of her holy practice is 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. This practice is a response to the mystery. It is an invitation into the larger story that says that this place itself speaks and offers sustenance. By its very nature undefinable, mystery manifests itself as a story that is being told, that continues from one generation to another. It can only be heard through careful listening to a larger story that beckons.

**Agnes Kramer-Hamstra’s** Ph.D. thesis is based on two films by Mohawk Shelley Niro, Haisla Eden Robinson’s *Monkey Beach*, Margaret Laurence’s *The Diviners*, and Rudy Wiebe’s *A Discovery of Strangers* and it asks how each text portrays what being at-home means for the characters and for their communities. Her M.A. thesis compared Guy DeBord’s theory of the spectacle with the function of spectacle (events) and spectacles (eyeglasses) in four stories by Flannery O’Connor. Both theses were developed within the academic community of the Department of English and Cultural Studies at McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario. She has given a variety of conference papers, among others on Eden Robinson, Thomas King and Flannery O’Connor.

### Notes

1. Lalage Grauer focuses on this ethical ambiguity, asking 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 (“You Can Be So Dense: Ambiguity in *Monkey Beach*.” Unpublished paper presented at Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association, Calgary, Alberta. 6 October 2007).
2. Joel Pfister critiques such language, arguing that “ ‘modern’ ...is too frequently used to represent certain dominant lifeways and values as distinctively ‘modern’ and...*equally contemporary* Native lifeways and values, sometimes termed ‘traditional’ – as ‘primitive’ or ‘sav-

age.' The gist is: if one is not 'modern'...then one must modernize, or be modernized.... Those who invoke the category of 'the modern,' moreover, frequently associate it with ideologies of (seemingly inevitable) progress to re-encode—to mystify—capitalist development, expansion, and power relations as human, cultural, socioeconomic, and technological evolution" (25). This article associates the discourse of mastery with this unquestioning belief in an inevitable and necessary evolution of technology, seen for example in the way that, without consultation, the dam was built to provide power for the Alcan Aluminum plant, a process that was taken for granted because it meant "progress," in a technological sense, which completely overshadowed the displacement of the Cheslatta T'en people. (This is described in the final part of this article.)

3. I would caution that while Robinson's portrayal of human agency gives her characters the power of choice to refuse to continue the violence done to them, she *also* portrays a systemic racism that continues to stifle and violate Haisla culture and community.

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