

THE INDIGENOUS GOTHIC NOVEL:
TRIBAL TWISTS, NATIVE MONSTERS, AND THE POLITICS OF
APPROPRIATION

by

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ABSTRACT

Although reading Native literature for cultural epistemology and rhetorical sovereignty remains important, an examination of Indigenous literature as text remains under-utilized. A critical inquiry into form and genre not only validates Native novels as literary art, it creates a fresh approach to their treatment of contemporary issues. Specifically, the recent prevalence of First Nations Gothic novels opens new questions for critics of Indigenous literature. Do certain genres better lend themselves to the common topics of Indigenous texts? How does the Gothic and the post/colonial synthesize uniquely into and perform within contemporary First Nations novels? What is it about the Gothic that might lend itself to the aesthetic purposes of an Indigenous author and why has this combination produced an abundance of triumphant texts in the last few decades? As a site of subversion, of a past that haunts the present, of a society in transition, and of cultural anxiety, these characteristics explain the current merger of the Gothic and the Indigenous. As I will delineate with various post/colonial theories and in specific texts such as Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach* and Joseph Boyden's *Three Day Road*, each of these themes proposes an invigorating method of Indigenizing the Gothic novel.

INTRODUCTION

At a time when many critics still view Indigenous literature as fictional anthropology, questions of genre are seldom raised within Native literature. However, overlaying traditional literary training onto these works only strengthens their richness and the growth of the field. In doing so, one may notice the abundance of contemporary Indigenous writers, from Gerald Vizenor to Eden Robinson and Sherman Alexie to Drew Hayden Taylor, turning to the Gothic genre. What is it about the Gothic that might lend itself to the aesthetic purposes of an Indigenous author and why has this combination produced an abundance of successful texts in the last few decades?

As a literary genre the Gothic distinctively synthesizes with the themes of Indigenous literature. As a site of subversion, of a past that haunts the present, of a society in transition, and of cultural anxiety, these characteristics explain the current merger of the Gothic and the Indigenous. Yet what makes the Indigenous Gothic unique? How might an Indigenous approach change or effect the conventions of the genre? Might the Indigenous Gothic become a subgenre, or might it invert the genre completely?

Before continuing with my analysis, I must mention that this essay takes a calculated risk. First, it deems intellectually appropriate to explore the above critical questions rather than argue an assertive thesis statement. This is necessary to the subject at hand because of the ambivalent nature of the relevant terms and of the complex realities they describe, especially the definitions of “indigenous” and “gothic.” To make assertions of these terms limits their malleability, the very tent that allows for their rich adaptability. I believe that this approach best addresses the dynamic nature of the Gothic

and the possibilities that the genre contains. The diversity of the genre calls for a diversity of approach, one that best reflects the dynamic nature of the Gothic.

Definition of Terms

In working with the terms “Indigenous” and “Gothic,” a short definition of terms must be addressed. Because both of these terms have the potential to be inflammatory and resistant to fixed classifications, this essay will not attempt to do so. Rather, I seek to explore malleable definitions by delineating characteristics and commonalities while pointing out sites of critical conflict. In using this approach, I could not agree more with Jarlath Killeen’s objection:

...‘purifying’ the genre, by ring-fencing it through a very strict definition and then evicting texts which fail to fit this definition, does not take full cognizance of the sheer generic openness of the Gothic and its ability to migrate and adapt to formal circumstances far removed from its ‘original’ manifestations in the late eighteenth century. (3)

This statement applies equally as well to the complexity of the Indigenous novel.

Although I acknowledge that strict definitions may be useful in some circumstances, in this case limiting one’s criticism of Indigenous or Gothic novels (and especially of their combination) to cold demarcations would likewise limit the value of that criticism.

Fred Botting, one of the foremost authorities on the Gothic, identifies the genre as almost impossible to define outside of its ambivalence and ambiguity. In his comprehensive study published in 1996, *Gothic*, he contextualizes the inchoate struggles over its definition: “In the contest for the meaning of ‘Gothic’ more than a single word was at stake. At issue were the differently constructed and valued meanings of the

Enlightenment, culture, nation and government as well as contingent, but no less contentious, significances of the family, nature, individuality and representation” (43). From its inception to its modern reincarnations, the Gothic by nature is contentious and political, its ambivalence stemming not from its signifiers but from what it signifies. In short, the Gothic genre began as “a network of associations whose positive or negative value depended on the political positions and representations with which Gothic figures were associated” (89). The definition of Gothic remains a kind of *tabula rosa*, a blank slate not of form but of function, whose implications are always political but whose meaning remains unusually malleable to the reader.

In spite of its ambiguity of definition, the Gothic genre does employ reliable conventions, or tropes from which to identify the genre. As Gothic critic Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick remarks, “Surely no other modern literary form as influential as the Gothic novel has also been as pervasively conventional. Once you know that a novel is of the Gothic kind (and you can tell that from the title), you can predict its contents with an unnerving certainty” (9). The contents to which she refers consist of a melodramatic and foreboding setting, a woman in distress, manifestations of the supernatural or uncanny, reference to that which is unspeakable, and a haunting of the past upon the present. These conventions may mutate according to region and time period (for example, the foreboding setting of the English castle to the malignant wilderness of America and Canada), but they are easily recognizable when grouped into the Gothic formula. Thus for the purposes of this essay, I will use the malleable term Gothic as being composed of

standard conventions while acknowledging as much as possible the ambiguous and ambivalent nature of the genre.

When discussing the Indigenous novel, many critics also work with malleable definitions of the genre. However, it may be useful to this conversation to reiterate the various questions prominent in the critical debate over a standard definition. Is an Indigenous novel one that is written about Native people by a Native author? Does that include or exclude a novel that does not discuss tribal culture but is written by a Native author? What about novels that discuss tribal life that are written by non-Natives?

Often, the answers to these questions cause contention among critics; Kit Dobson inserts an example of this debate into her study of Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach*, a text declared to be a First Nations Gothic novel. Dobson remarks, "I began to think more about *Monkey Beach* after Lee Maracle commented to Smaro Kamboureli and myself in an interview that she wasn't sure that, for her, *Monkey Beach* qualified as a Haisla book because Robinson wrote like a mainstream writer" (Dobson, italics added). Dobson contrasts Maracle's statement with the fact that "*Monkey Beach* is, however, packaged, marketed, discussed, and written as a Native text" (Dobson, italics added). This comment of Lee Maracle, a prominent First Nations Canadian author, gets to the heart of the current debates over Indigenous literature: in what ways, if any, does it need to distinguish itself from mainstream writing? Who has the authority to exclude authors and texts, by what criteria? Does Lee Maracle, a woman of Salish and Cree ancestry, have the authority to exclude a text from another culture in spite of Dobson's evidence that most see *Monkey Beach* as an Indigenous novel?

This essay by no means attempts to answer these questions of authenticity; rather, it seeks to acknowledge the discourse of the field in order to open up added levels of meaning in the novels. In other words, my study offers dynamic meanings or potential answers through the exploration of dynamic definitions. Therefore in this study, I malleably define the Indigenous or Native novel as a text written by a Native American or First Nations person that includes culturally-specific knowledge. In general I prefer a more inclusive definition, but within the confines of this essay this definition most accurately describes the novel examined since Drew Hayden Taylor's *The Night Wanderer: A Native Gothic Novel* is written by a member of a First Nation tribe of Canada and uses specific cultural knowledge in the novel. Furthermore, I capitalize Indigenous and Native to distinguish them from their general use in referring to non-political entities and use the term to refer to the tribes who have traditional homelands within the borders of the continental United States and Canada. Certainly there are many opportunities for further scholarship of the Indigenous Gothic when one has the space for broader definitions of Indigenous.

The Gothic Genre

The Gothic operates with an ambiguity and ambivalence that present a range of possibilities for the Indigenous novel. It explores avenues that converge thematically with current commonalities of Native literature, although both genres offer an overwhelming array of challenges and rewards. One such challenge for the Gothic may be working with a genre "in which nothing, whether formally, ideologically or culturally,

is ever settled or decided” (Killeen 167). This section will further explore the points of intersection between the Gothic and Indigenous literatures as well as represent various challenges and rewards of analyzing such a difficult genre.

The tremendous strength of the Gothic lies within its ambiguity, of which there are several layers. First, within the Gothic itself there is an ambiguity of political agenda. In its inception, the Gothic became a medium in which a war over the interpretation of the past was fought, a war that quickly resulted in a stalemate. As Botting summarizes,

The contest for a coherent and stable account of the past, however, produced an ambivalence that was not resolved. The complex and often contradictory attempts either to make the past barbaric in contrast to an enlightened present or to find in it a continuity that gave English culture a stable history had the effect of bringing to the fore and transforming the way in which both past and present depended on modes of representation. (23)

Depending upon one’s political opinions of the past and thus on the current state of a given society’s “progress,” the implications of the term Gothic could have diverse meanings. As a result, the chemistry of the Gothic fused in such a way as to suspend meaning, opening to all comers the significance of the signifier.

Due to this ambiguity, scholars new to the study of the Gothic may begin to see elements of the genre everywhere, and indeed they may be correct. Although Killeen protests that “critics are far too quick to assign the term ‘Gothic’ to any literature which employs conventions or tropes tangentially linked to the original tradition” (2), he later concedes, “From the realist to the historical novel, from the strictest of rationalists to the most credulous of believers, the Gothic became ubiquitous” (3). Other critics such as Catherine Spooner argue that the pervasiveness of the genre evidences its contemporary

significance, citing the use of the Gothic by authors such as William Faulkner, James Joyce, T.S. Eliot, Joseph Conrad, H.P. Lovecraft, and Stephen King. Many scholars agree with her that “by the opening of the twenty-first century Gothic has become one of the most crucial and widely used modes in contemporary fiction” (Spooner 46). Whether or not critics overemphasize its ambiguity, there is certainly a significance attached to the genre that demands contemporary attention.

The Gothic’s high degree of mutability permits its adoption by various, sometimes politically opposed communities. A brief description of its subgenres reveals such diverse uses. Critics frame the imperialistic Gothic novel, for example, as a body of texts that do the subliminal work of colonization, often presenting an exotic “Other” as an entity needing exploration and conquest. Simultaneously, this subgenre contains what critics such as Stephen Arata call the “anxiety of reverse colonization,” a subconscious, psychological fear that those whom the colonizer attempts to control will revolt and overpower their dominion. For example, Arata examines Stoker’s *Dracula* in light of the novel’s emphasis on the vampire, a specific use of the Gothic convention of monstrosity that “transforms the materials of the vampire myth, making them bear the weight of the culture’s fears over its declining status. The appearance of vampires becomes the sign of profound trouble” (629). Thus the imperial Gothic novel may be read by some as an affirmation of colonization of an exotic Other, sometimes portrayed in monstrous images, or the imperial Gothic novel may be read with a similar political lens as Arata, a subliminal revelation of the insecurities or cultural guilt of a colonizing society.

The frontier Gothic has similar tendencies of the imperialistic Gothic, except that the setting occurs at the site of colonization. Examples of this subgenre include many novels set in the shifting American West, from the James Fenimore Cooper novels to Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* to John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. While these novels are not usually read as Gothic novels, they hold the potential for horror as seen from an Indigenous perspective. It is this frontier Gothic that has received specific attention from Native critics such as Louis Owens, as will be accounted for in greater detail later in this essay.

The postcolonial Gothic is a relatively recent subgenre, popularly examined by specialists in ethnic and minority literature. Most theorists hypothesize this subgenre as a way in which the colonized "write back to the empire," reading colonization as the instigator of the conventions of horror in the Gothic. Kathleen Brogan employs this postcolonial Gothic theory in her reading of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, asserting that the novel attempts to incorporate the horrors of slavery into the national and historical consciousness. She states, "In giving narrative organization to Sethe's experience [in *Beloved*]...Morrison defines historical consciousness as a good form of haunting, in which the denied ghosts of the American past are integrated into our national identity" (154). In her reading, the main character Sethe represents America's historical conscious that becomes haunted by the horror of slavery, signified in Sethe's case by the haunting from her infant daughter, murdered by Sethe's own hand in order to keep her from a life of slavery. Brogan and other critics of the postcolonial Gothic see novels like these as a way for marginalized groups to raise their voices in mainstream society towards political

power. Thus within these major three subgenres, politically opposed groups are able to use the Gothic for polarized objectives due to the versatility of the genre.

The Gothic affords a great deal of artistic freedom for writers of all persuasions. Although at times challenging for critics, Botting insists that “Changing features, emphases and meanings disclose Gothic writing as a mode that exceeds genre and categories, restricted neither to a literary school nor to a historical period” (14). This allows a freedom from formula and fixed technique, simply leaving the artist to choose from the array of Gothic conventions. Other critics praise Gothic writing as “vibrant,” “flexible,” and “dynamic,” as it “endlessly reinvents itself” (Powell and Smith 2, McEvoy 7). Gothic writing also leaves room for the subversive writer as it “emerges and takes shape in relation to dominant literary practices, a relationship that is as much antithetical as imitative” (Botting 15). Perhaps no other genre offers such artistic leeway as the Gothic, allowing writers who employ it an opportunity to rise above the restrictions that writers of other genres may experience.

Intersections of Indigenous and Gothic

Two aspects of the Gothic that radically intersect with Indigenous literature are its predominant appearance in times of cultural transition and its complications of the abilities of language. In regards to the first, although the genre is marked by changing and various meanings, scholars agree that the Gothic flourishes in times of cultural transition, a status that many claim to be current for Native cultures. The ambivalence of the genre marvelously lends itself to both the nostalgic and anticipatory attitudes that

accompany societal change. The Gothic novel skillfully negotiates liminality without attempting an agenda, leaving the critic with conundrums but the readers with the comfort of an ally in times of change. Due to the power of the genre, however, this ambivalence communicates itself as comforting as well as disturbing. It creates a space in which a projection into the future may be imagined safely and fictionally by an individual interpretation of the reader who may be enabled to “account for or deal with the uncertainty of these shifts” (Botting 23). Through the Gothic, then, the instability of cultural transition may be reflected in the familiar venue of literature, allowing readers the comfort of recognition and a space for the projection of imagination.

Language

As applicable to current trends in Native literature, the Indigenous Gothic synthesizes neatly with modern and postmodern concerns with the failure of language. Within the criticism this concern manifests in both concrete and abstract ways: the devastating decrease or loss of Native languages, and the theoretical unease as to whether the colonized, Other, or subaltern may possess a voice within the colonizer’s culture. Perhaps more than any other genre, the Gothic avails itself as viable vehicle for these concerns. As Botting proposes, “One of the principal horrors lurking throughout Gothic fiction is the sense that there is no exit from the darkly illuminating labyrinth of language” (14). Sedgwick concurs with this perspective, stating, “the difficulty the story has in getting itself told is of the most obvious structural significance” (13). Perhaps the turn to the Gothic in Indigenous literature has occurred because of its ability to both use

and question language, specifically expressing a Native culture through the English language. Whether or not it is possible for the Other to successfully negotiate language in its own terms is outside the scope of this paper, but the attempt that critics Owens and Velie see happening within the Indigenous Gothic to invert the Other to the Self might contain exciting possibilities for further research, as discussed in a later section of this essay.

Tribal Origins of the Gothic

The etymological source of the word “Gothic” originally referred to a tribe, specifically the German “Goth” tribe according to the Oxford English Dictionary. This tribal culture apparently had no small impact on the British since the term collected several different usages from architecture to literature over the centuries. When “Gothic” became a reference to literature, the OED defines it as “Barbarous, rude, uncouth, unpolished, in bad taste. Of temper: Savage.” It doesn’t take a postcolonial critic to recognize the metanarrative of colonialism in this definition, or the parallels to common derogatory terminology such as “savage” hurled at Indigenous people. With these kinds of commonalities of discourse, it seems only a matter of time before Indigenous writers and critics would reclaim the Gothic genre for their own political purposes, as has been the trend in Native literature since its Renaissance in the 1960s.

On a more positive association, Botting also claims the influence of the Goth on British politics, arguing, “The native culture that it [the Gothic] referred to was one composed of those indigenous peoples and invaders whose occupation preceded the

invasions of Romans. Any relics of a non-Roman past were taken as evidence of a native and enduring tradition of independence” (42). Depending on the politics of the eighteenth-century reader, the Gothic could have affirmative connotations related to enduring, independent tribal societies instead of negative associations of a “primitive” or “dark” past. This ambivalence provides a rich opportunity for a redress of the Gothic treatment of the exotic Other, in this case Indigenous peoples. On a different continent at a different moment in history, Indigenous writers play with new perspectives of the Gothic to create not simply a new subgenre, but a unique re-working of a genre steeped in racism.

Critical Beginnings: Owens and Velie

Early tremors of an increasing interest in Indigenous Gothic literature came from critics Alan R. Velie and Louis Owens. Both published short essays in 1991 and 1993, respectively, focusing on the work of the preeminent Native American author and theorist Gerald Vizenor. In “Gerald Vizenor’s Indian Gothic,” Velie approaches the Indigenous Gothic optimistically, suggesting that contemporary Native writers use the genre to work at “reexamining traditional American genres, myths, and themes from a different perspective, the Indian point of view” (75). His essay specifically examines the “frontier gothic,” a subgenre that Velie defines and then inverts with the following: “If the frontier gothic is a romantic novel of terror set in the western wilderness with Indians playing the role of satanic villains, [Vizenor’s] *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart* is the obverse: it is a novel of horror written from an Indian point of view....” (75). The rest of Velie’s

focus is limited to Vizenor's employment of the trickster for this inversion, ending with the conclusion that Vizenor proposes a spiritual victory rather than a political one through his Gothic novel. Although Velie's reliance on the trickster (a hypersexual mischievous being used in many Native mythologies to affirm social mores) is dated compared to contemporary scholarship, Velie offers groundbreaking scholarship in his attempt to frame the burgeoning Indigenous Gothic genre.

Owens' essay, "'Grinning Aboriginal Demons': Gerald Vizenor's *Bearheart* and the Indian's Escape From Gothic" is far less optimistic than Velie's, although he too advocates for the subversive possibilities of the genre. He takes to task the American metanarratives in canonical literature for imprisoning Native people "as a static artifact within the discourse of the American myth" (72). Like Velie, he chooses Vizenor's *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart* as the text in which to examine the Indigenous Gothic and the trickster as an avenue of subversion. Unlike Velie, however, Owens contextualizes the Indigenous Gothic novel within the larger context of the American Gothic tradition while bringing into play the possibilities available to language within the genre.

Owen's strategy in his argument is to first delineate what he calls the "inherited paradigms of the American gothic" in reference to the concept of "Indian" (71). He does this by first couching the term in the lens of language, "Indian" as a constrictive signifier within the discourse of American myth as quoted above. Owens then proceeds to argue for the inversion of the Gothic as he sees happening within Vizenor's novel, namely an "act of deconstruction, freeing Indian/mixedblood identity from the 'shroud' of the

American metanarrative, inverting the gothic landscape, liberating language” (72).

Notice again the emphasis made on language and the possibilities of the Gothic that Owens asserts. He is claiming that the genre allows for a deconstruction of static signifiers, breaking boundaries not only of Self/Other perspectives but of the terms themselves.

Owen’s argument climaxes with the statement, “The gothic Indian, that imagined construct imprisoned in an absolute, untouchable past, is deconstructed, and the contemporary Indian is granted both freedom to imagine him/herself in new and radical ways, as well as responsibility for that self-definition” (77). The Self/Other dichotomy in the frontier Gothic finds a reversal in Owen’s analysis of Vizenor’s novel, a reversal that may be projected onto other Indigenous Gothic novels as well.

Both Owens and Velie provide valuable groundwork in evaluating the Indigenous Gothic. However, critical study needs to move beyond evaluations of the trickster to further advance the scholarship of the genre. Many other authors than Vizenor utilize the genre, and critical contributions regarding their novels would better reveal commonalities of the movement.

“THE TREES WILL HOLD SKULLS IN THEIR BRANCHES”: UNEARTHING THE
GOTHIC IN JOSEPH BOYDEN’S *THREE DAY ROAD*”

In their comprehensive study, *The Routledge Companion to the Gothic*, Spooner and McEvoy boldly announce that “by the opening of the twenty-first century Gothic has become one of the most crucial and widely used modes in contemporary fiction” (46). Their statement, though significant, gains in magnitude when synthesized with that of Gothic expert Fred Botting, who explains, “The diffusion of Gothic features across texts and historical periods distinguishes the Gothic as a hybrid form, incorporating and transforming other literary forms as well as developing and changing its own conventions in relation to newer modes of writing” (14). For contemporary literature, then, the Gothic is everywhere. It is alloying itself into the ink of our modern writers, weaving its way into modern plots, and providing fodder for modern criticism. Yet in spite of its ubiquity, examining the Gothic does not enjoy the popularity of other critical modes and theories. Why is it that the Gothic, in particular the Indigenous Gothic, is critical to the 21st century, and what might be gained from employing a Gothic lens as a reader, critic, or teacher?

Although ostensibly in the genre of military fiction, Boyden’s *Three Day Road* (2005) invokes the major conventions of the Gothic novel, namely those of the unspeakable, the uncanny, a past haunting the present, and a foreboding setting. Because the Gothic novel has been a hybrid from its inception, the genre remains remarkably difficult to identify without a perspicacious appreciation of its conventions. Once identified, however, the Gothic undertones add a textual and symbolic richness that often promptly connect the novel to the foremost philosophical and political questions of the

current century. *Three Day Road* is no exception. Recognizing its genre and the nature of its Gothic hybridity, not to mention its significance as an Indigenous Gothic novel, adds even greater dimensions and implications to this phenomenal debut by Boyden.

The plot of the novel centers around the friendship of Elijah Whiskeyjack and Xavier Bird and their combat experiences in World War I. Although they have developed since childhood a friendship so intimate that Xavier's Aunt Niska calls them "more brothers than friends" (Boyden 268), at the end of the novel Xavier exterminates his best friend because of his belief that the war has made Elijah into a windigo, a cannibalistic monster. Shortly after this ritualistic killing, Xavier is seriously wounded by enemy fire, resulting in the loss of his leg, a morphine addiction, and a hospitalized reprieve from combat until the end of the war.

These characters, as well as Boyden himself, have Indigenous heritage. Although Elijah's tribal heritage is not discussed within the novel, he speaks fluent Cree, seems to be familiar with Cree culture, and is not treated as an outsider by Cree and Ojibwe tribal members Xavier and Niska. Although Elijah does not join Xavier and Niska until his later childhood, Niska raises both boys in the traditional Cree way in which she herself was raised, living off the land with minimum contact with the outside world. With this cultural upbringing, all of the characters tell their stories from their Cree point of view. This Indigenous perspective qualifies *Three Day Road* as an Indigenous novel, according to the criteria previously provided in the introduction.

Although many critics identify *Three Day Road* as an Indigenous novel, fewer will recognize it as a Gothic novel. With the following analysis of the setting, the

uncanny, the unspeakable, and time, I seek to offer the methods and benefits of reading this novel with an eye towards the Gothic and the contemporary relevancy such a reading has for a critical audience. I believe that Boyden appropriates these Gothic conventions to express an Indigenous perspective within the novel that can have significant political implications.

Setting

Gothic settings are fertile ground for terror. Typical Gothic settings—the castle, the wilderness, and the city—may hold romantic possibilities in other genres, but in the Gothic these seemingly benign landscapes become dangerous producers of the unexpected, the unfamiliar, and the uncanny. Botting names them “desolate, alienating, and full of menace” (2). They are mysterious and often terrifying, isolating labyrinths in which monsters may appear from around the bend. Furthermore, Gothic settings incite emotions of horror, “designed to quicken readers’ pulses in terrified expectation” (Botting 44). Although it is the monsters of the Gothic that frighten, it is the setting that builds anxiety to the extent that it may even become a monster in itself.

This description could not be more apt of the setting in *Three Day Road*, not only because of the context of World War I, but also because of the advent of modern technology. Because of these major changes at the turn of the century, the landscape constantly shocks the characters into horror as they witness a setting full of destruction, menace, and pieces of the grimacing dead. In this novel Boyden both conforms to this

Gothic convention and transforms it into a horrifying environment from a specific Indigenous perspective.

In addition, for Indigenous characters the advent of modern technology becomes twice as alienating. Not only is the new technology strange and potentially dangerous, it symbolizes the indelible presence of the colonizers and their foreign culture. The voluntary participation of Xavier and Elijah in an international war sends tremors through all of the Indigenous characters as they realize the catastrophic harm modern Western culture and technology are capable of. Within his manipulations of this Gothic convention, Boyden firmly establishes through the setting a fictional and terrified Cree perspective unique to the Gothic tradition.

In the first case, the advent of technology sets the tone of menace for the novel's Gothic setting. In the first pages of the novel as Niska waits for her nephew to arrive by train, she comments, "I look out at the spruce across the tracks. Blackened by soot, they bend in defeat" (Boyden 4). Even for this woman who imagines her perception from the townspeople as "an Indian animal straight out of the bush," she feels a distance from the natural world as something she must "look out at" (3, 4). Furthermore, the nature around her has been radically changed by railroad technology: the natural color of the spruce has been unnaturally "blackened by soot," and as a result the trees "bend in defeat" against the inexorable force of the Industrial Revolution. The minimally altered environment of her childhood is changing in potentially menacing ways.

Niska describes the technological machines themselves as fearful creatures. As the train arrives, she relates, "I watch the beast pull up and give one last great sigh, as if it

is very tired from the long journey, smoke pouring from its sides” (5). Later in the same scene she also relays, “We try to cross the road but an automobile honks like a goose and swerves around. I watch carefully and must wait a long time until I can judge that we can cross safely” (7). Niska’s descriptions portray her fear of the modern insertion of technology into her familiar environment, machines to “watch carefully” from a safe distance.

Although in another novel these machines may represent Gothic monsters instead of a Gothic setting, *Three Day Road* primarily focuses on the monsters of war over those of technology. The Industrial Revolution and its products take on more of a background menace that may accurately be considered a part of the setting. For example, Niska recalls her first sighting of an automobile, saying,

The smell of it was horrible, a burning smell that was sweet and sickening at the same time, the smell of this new era that I’d managed to live into....the noise rattled and choked to a stop. The air was suddenly quiet again and the birds continued chirping. They’d grown accustomed to this strange thing. I was amazed.
(273)

While the birds and townspeople have adjusted to the new technology, Niska has not yet been able to adjust. She is justifiably appalled at these inventions, as well as amazed by the ability of nature to grow accustomed to something so potentially harmful. She rightly attributes these changes to the coming of a new era, one in which the domestic inventions are mere scenery compared to the bellicose ones.

War is the foremost focus of this advent of technology in the novel. Niska becomes especially horrified by technology in relation to war. When an elder visits her with news of the war, she recollects,

I was troubled by what he told me. The *wemistikoshiw* had gone mad with war and had invented tools to kill one another that were beyond belief....the enemy had created an invisible weapon. When you breathed the air that it rode on, you choked to death. Was this true? Another invention was a great metal machine that rolled on tracks and fired exploding bullets. (272)

While the domestic machines imposed upon her familiar world scare her, Niska is terrified beyond her imagination at the thought of such technological destruction. This information gives her an anxiety that, as mentioned previously, has the potential to become a monster in itself; however, the military technology is the mere backdrop to the largest menace of the setting—World War I itself.

The setting of Xavier's experiences in World War I contains all the horror of the Gothic. Neither the soldiers nor the reader can prepare themselves for the gruesome encounters with the dead or almost dead that litter the landscape. The sheer numbers of the deceased necessitate their disposal into any available means--water, mud, trenches, even trees. Xavier tries to describe this horror at the unnatural fusion of the dead and nature to Niska with the following example:

“Do you want to know something, Auntie,” I say, cupping my hand and taking a small sip from the river. “So many dead men lay buried over there that if the bush grows back the trees will hold skulls in their branches.” I laugh, and it makes me feel worse. “I saw it already. We once left a place covered in our dead. When we came back a few months later flowers redder than blood grew everywhere. They covered the ground. They even grew out of rotting corpses.” (70)

Although death and burial in the earth can be considered natural, the extent to which the earth is overwhelmed with bodies becomes a landscape that horrifies. Still, all this horror

fades to the scenery as again, the central movement of the plot is the relationship between Xavier and Elijah, to which everything else merely provides the atmosphere.

As a soldier, Xavier tries to adjust to this horrific setting, but he cannot quite become accustomed to this co-habitation with the dead. At one point he remembers a covert expedition in which he unsuccessfully tried to forget his terrible surroundings, recalling,

I follow his lead, looking at the scarred landscape all around without moving my eyes. Under the bright glow of the flare it is strangely peaceful, rock-strewn and muddy and silent so that it isn't difficult to forget I'm in the middle of a terrible place. In the dimming light I make out a grinning face next to me. It belongs to a soldier long dead, but I cannot tell from which side. His face is frozen in a perpetual smile, as if he is chuckling at what he knows.
(29)

As soon as Xavier tries to imagine himself in a peaceful, almost pastoral landscape, the gruesomeness of the setting rears its ugly head. The dead appear as an unnatural part of the landscape, a grizzly background for the interaction between characters. Another Gothic convention blends as well into this one, that of the unspeakable. Xavier imagines the dead man to be “chuckling at what he knows,” but of course he is unable to communicate his knowledge from his deceased state. Again, this hybridity is typical of the Gothic as it not only blends its conventions with that of other genres, but also at times integrates its own conventions into each other.

Analyzing the setting with an eye towards its role as a Gothic convention highlights the effect it has on the characters. Instead of marginalizing the setting as backdrop or scenery, Gothic critics draw attention to the active, menacing role of the setting that often becomes an underlying source of anxiety in the novel. Noticing the

aesthetic purposes of a Gothic setting is also to notice the sense of alienation that it produces, as evidenced in this novel by the alienation technology produces on the Cree characters.

Finally, the greatest compelling reason for analyzing the setting as a Gothic convention comes from the relationships it creates. A Gothic setting in combination with other conventions helps to identify the fusion of the Gothic genre into the novel. Even more significantly, the setting of the Indigenous Gothic establishes a political environment essential to the relationship between the land and the characters, the characters and their nationality, and their nationality and the events of history. Just as the setting may signify the difference between the Imperialistic Gothic and the Frontier Gothic, the setting also creates a political climate intrinsic to the Indigenous Gothic.

Indigenous Monsters and the Uncanny

Another convention essential to the Indigenous Gothic novel is the uncanny, the most central of which are tribally-specific monsters. Within each novel thus far examined, without exception, its monsters materialize directly from a tribally-specific story and with a tribally-specific name. In the case of Boyden's *Three Day Road*, this monster is called the windigo. This creature comes from Cree and Ojibwe mythology, although there are similar creatures in other tribes. Niska describes the windigo according to her Cree upbringing, saying "We'd grown up on stories of the *windigo* that our parents fed us over winter fires, of people who eat other people's flesh and grow into wild beasts twenty feet tall whose hunger can be satisfied only by more human flesh and

then the hunger turns worse” (41). The windigo is obsessed with killing and eating, and the novel reflects this obsession with its aesthetically ubiquitous allusions to hunting and eating.

Most significantly to the plot, Xavier believes that Elijah has slowly turned into a windigo during the course of the war. Xavier begins to notice a change in Elijah in their first days in the combat zone but dismisses its implications initially when he comments, “I see how Elijah’s eyes glow, how he is feeding off the fear and madness of this place. He makes a good soldier” (25). Elijah’s actions beyond his duties as a soldier, however, become too disturbing for Xavier to ignore. Elijah befriends some Frenchmen who encourage him to take scalps from his kills as a sniper, telling him, ““Do what we do. Collect evidence of your kills. Do what my people taught your people a long time ago. Take the scalp of your enemy as proof. Take a bit of him to feed you”” (188). Elijah takes their advice while Xavier reflects on the Frenchmen, “I think that they are *windigos*” (191), with the disturbing implication that Elijah may too, become a windigo.

Before Xavier can admit to himself Elijah’s transformation into a monster, Xavier begins to acknowledge Elijah’s descent into madness, a trait that Xavier eventually uses to confirm his diagnosis. The first signs of this madness come when Elijah develops a morphine addiction, leaving Xavier “sick with worry. Elijah has let the medicine drive him mad” (212). Slowly Xavier comes to terms with Elijah’s sickness, saying, “He never lost his ability to talk. I think it was this ability that fooled the other around us into believing he hadn’t gone mad. But I knew,” and then even more directly, “To me he is mad. I am the only one now to know Elijah’s secrets, and Elijah has turned himself into

something invincible, something inhuman” (229, 321). Xavier knows that this “something invincible, something inhuman” has the ability to transcend beyond a simple explanation of madness or shell shock.

Proof of Elijah as windigo slowly adds up. Xavier admits, “I remember him learning to love killing rather than simply killing to survive” (249). Elijah’s abilities as a sniper, a hunter of human flesh, become more astute as his passion for it increases. Xavier is sick to acknowledge about his best friend, “I see a hunger in Elijah that he can’t satisfy” (301). Although Elijah’s scalping places him on a path that Xavier believes he cannot come back from, the last straw comes when Xavier believes he witnesses Elijah eating human flesh (321). What Elijah has become through the war is now undeniable.

Lastly, at the height of Elijah’s behavior comes a misunderstanding. Xavier receives a letter from Niska while in the combat zone, a letter that a third party had written on Niska’s behalf because of her illiteracy in English. Because of the multiple language barriers the characters experience in written English, Xavier believes the letter to mean, “God understands if you must kill Elijah” (294). He interprets this message as an affirmation of Elijah’s windigo status and his own duties as a windigo killer.

Although Elijah’s transformation into a windigo has devastating emotional effects on Xavier, he knows he must come to terms with his inheritance as a windigo killer. He knows that his grandfather had special abilities as a windigo killer, as does Niska who relates early in the novel, “I am the second to last in a long line of *windigo* killers. There is still one more” (44). Her implication is that Xavier, trained and adept in his cultural ways of survival, will be the remaining and final windigo killer in the family. Her

prophecy comes to pass as Xavier strangles Elijah to death in a combat zone, tears streaming down his face (340). Because of its perspective as an Indigenous Gothic novel, the windigo as a tribally-specific monster occurs within a tribally-specific paradigm, contextualizing for these Cree characters not only Elijah's behavior but also the appropriate response.

Vikki Visvis's provocative article, "Culturally Conceptualizing Trauma: The Windigo in Joseph Boyden's *Three Day Road*," reinforces the need to comprehend both the windigo and the associated actions in the novel from within a Cree paradigm. Her insight to the greater metaphor of the war as a windigo further emphasizes the Indigenous perspective of the novel:

However, rather than conceptualizing the European war effort as a general phenomenon, the novel figuratively depicts it as an implacable and ravenous Windigo that consumes the lives of soldiers and civilians: 'It has sucked the life from Saint-Eloi and left it like this, has moved on in search of more bodies to try and fill its impossible hunger' (67). Historical catastrophe, specifically the mass loss of human life, is, then, represented as anathema in a First Nations context. (Visvis 230)

Like the aforementioned Cree perspective of technology as represented through Niska, the Cree paradigm in the novel conceptualizes war in a different way than the Europeans do. Xavier's narrative in the above excerpt all but calls the war a windigo as Visvis points out, but it is important to emphasize for the purposes of this study the assertive appropriation of a European war into an Indigenous paradigm. Visvis calls this a "discursive construction" (235), a political move that empowers Cree ways of knowing.

Visvis goes on to argue the further political assertions *Three Day Road* makes as an Indigenous Gothic novel, claiming its use of Gothic techniques displace notions of

savagery from Indigenous people and place it on European agents. She specifically points to the discourse on scalping within the novel as well as the windigo killings, stressing, “These Gothic aesthetics [of violence and cannibalism] are reproduced in the novel in the context of ritual Windigo killings; however, rather than investing First Nation characters with the violent savagery traditionally encoded in these aesthetics, Boyden’s narrative inverts their implications, attributing their significance to European colonial agency” (238). Whereas traditionally the Gothic tradition painted Indigenous characters as violent and savage, *Three Day Road* complicates the discourses of barbarism. Although the nature of the Gothic does not allow for neat reversals—Elijah does become a windigo, after all—the Indigenous Gothic as represented in this novel makes unprecedented strides in manipulating a discourse used for disempowerment into one of empowerment.

Unspeakable

The commonality of the unspeakable makes it the most crucial convention of the Gothic novel. Typically the unspeakable occurs in association with the uncanny, such as a terrified character struck speechless at the appearance of the supernatural or, afterwards, the inability to express through words an experience with the uncanny. Alternatively, the unspeakable also interacts with a dubious past to haunt the present, such as one’s silence or inability to speak of one’s fears begins to belie the false security of the present. Ultimately, as Gothic scholar Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick teaches, “At its simplest the

unspeakable appears on almost every page,” (14) and the political complications of modern post/colonial literature further provoke the frequencies of the unspeakable.

In the Indigenous Gothic text, the unspeakable things unspoken, to use Toni Morrison’s phrase, often reference historical trauma and the tenuousness of language. Far from expressing a defeatist attitude towards these issues, however, novels like *Three Day Road* take the unspeakable into the 21st century, by first appropriating it to Indigenous perspectives and issues, then maneuvering it beyond the horror into other modes of expression.

The tenuousness of language is symbolized in *Three Day Road* in three ways: the language barriers between English and Cree, the failure of language to express the experience of war, and within the novel itself the difficulty of writing a Cree perspective in English. One notable absence in this novel of the tenuousness of language worthy of mention, however, is the anxiety over the loss of Indigenous languages. Most of the characters do have brief sojourns at residential schools; however, the combination of the time period of the novel (early 20th century) and characters’ opportunity to speak Cree as their primary language throughout their lives diminishes the anxiety that is often predominant in other Indigenous Gothic novels.

Although both Elijah and Xavier speak fluent Cree, barriers arise between them as Elijah is also fluent in English while Xavier is not. When they volunteer for World War I, Xavier becomes alienated by his refusal to speak English, claiming, “I’m still uncomfortable with the language of the *wemistikoshiw*. It is spoken through the nose and hurts my mouth to try and mimic the silly sound of it. I opt to stay quiet most of the time,

listening carefully to decipher the words, always listening for the joke or insult made against me” (12). The English language becomes Xavier’s unspeakable, a choice that marginalizes him during the war. Eventually, Xavier notices that “I am forced by my poor English to sit back and watch it all happen, to see how he wins them over, while I become more invisible” (60). His inability to converse in the dominant language alienates Xavier from the community of soldiers and to them solidifies him as an Other, an invisible being.

However, because this is an Indigenous Gothic novel, Xavier turns this instance of unspeakability into one of political resistance. Niska recalls, “As a child he was so proud that more than once he claimed he would never speak the *wemistikoshiw* tongue” (82). Later this Indigenous pride serves Xavier again in the war zone when he resolves, “Me, I won’t give in to this army’s ways so easy. I learn their English but pretend I don’t. When an officer speaks to me I look at him and answer in Cree” (72). Rather than allow his unspeakability of the English language to defeat him, he maneuvers this unspeakable into a mode of resistance and strength.

Elijah chooses a different path. He spent more time in a residential school than Xavier and he holds an innate language ability. Xavier explains,

Since we were boys Elijah has always had a gift for *wemistikoshiw* language. Once the nuns taught him to speak English, they couldn’t stop him and soon learned to regret that they ever had. In school, it got so that Elijah learned to talk his way out of anything, gave great long speeches so that his words snaked themselves like vines around the nuns until they could no longer move, just shake their heads hopelessly at the pretty little boy who could speak their tongue like one of their bishops. (54)

Elijah's method takes what could have been a disadvantage to him, being forced to learn another language, and manipulates it into such a great strength that Xavier can only compare it to a boa constrictor.

Possessing such a strength through these means, however, can be dangerous. Niska observes other residential school experiences less positively than Elijah's, saying, "When the children came back, they were different, speaking in the *wemistikoshiw* tongue, talking back to their parents, fighting and hitting one another, crying in the middle of the night for reasons they could not explain" (84). The abuse they experienced certainly caused these reactions, but perhaps their confusion over their new and enforced cultural liminality marks this difference as well. As an example, Xavier remarks about Elijah, "His Cree name is Weesageechak. But that is something he doesn't share with the *wemistikoshiw*. Whiskeyjack is how they say his name, make it their own. He has told me that what they do to his name is what sounds to my ears like a longer word for *bastard*, making his name a name without a family" (142). Here perhaps Elijah has let his strength overpower him, shaping his name and his desires into something that alienates him from his own cultural inheritance.

Secondly, within the novel itself there are linguistic barriers between English and Cree. As can be observed throughout this chapter's quotations, the narration of the novel includes untranslated Cree words in place of English words. This can be interpreted in at least two ways. In regards to the language itself, one can easily and safely assume that there are words that can never be holistically translated from Cree to English. Next, the use of Cree words can be understood from Xavier's viewpoint: a means of resistance.

Though the novel is mostly written in English for an English audience, it attempts to bolster its Indigenous perspective by incorporating the Cree language. Whether or not it is possible for the Other to successfully negotiate language in its own terms is a question outside the scope of this paper; however, the attempt that I see happening in using language to invert the Other to the Self might further provoke that discussion.

Finally, the tenuousness of language within this text is further evidenced by its inability to express one's experience of war. The unspeakable here acts in both ways previously mentioned: an encounter with the uncanny, and the failure afterwards to describe that encounter. Communication fails because there is so much of the narration that cannot be heard or said. Much of Xavier's memories of the war remain unvoiced to Niska, in spite of the readers' access to his thoughts. We know this by the fact that Niska does not know until the final scene in the sweatlodge that Xavier killed Elijah, even though he had narrated that story previously (349, 340). Furthermore, Xavier finds a sort of solace in this unspeakable, as he claims, "We all acted over there in ways it is best not to speak of" (Boyden 10). Whether Xavier is unable or unwilling to communicate his military experience, it is the horror inducing the unspeakable that rings clear.

In addition, Xavier's hearing has been damaged by the war, prohibiting him from participating in most of the communication around him, especially in the battle zone. He admits to himself, "My hearing leaves me more than it is with me any more" (24), making the unspeakable a double bind by being both inexpressible and unable to be heard. As a result, Niska is never quite sure that her stories of healing are heard by Xavier, whose consciousness weaves in and out of a morphine-induced trance, a result of

the war. Several times throughout her narrations she whispers to herself, “I don’t know how many of my words he has heard” (331). Here again the unspeakable results in alienation, of Xavier from Niska and her healing, as well as from the veteran community.

In spite of all these failures, communication triumphs in the larger picture. Xavier allows his memory to communicate to his own spirit, contributing to his choice to live. Niska continues to believe in the power of words and stories in spite of the shortcomings of linguistic expression. She believes in the abilities of a story to transcend the unspeakable in mysterious ways as she murmurs, “There is truth in this story that Xavier needs to hear, and maybe it is best that he hear it in sleep so that the medicine in the tale can slip into him unnoticed” (240). Even though this faith in the power of stories to heal cannot be called only an Indigenous perspective, Niska certainly comes from an oral tradition that supports her faith. In these ways, the Indigenous Gothic in *Three Day Road* works to overcome the unspeakable through culturally specific ways, such as oral storytelling for healing, the Cree language for political resistance, and the use of the unspeakable itself as a political stance.

The Return of the Repressed: Time and Narration

The narration of the novel, aside from a preliminary vignette of Elijah and Xavier’s childhood set in italics, begins through Niska, who is waiting at a train station to escort her nephew home after the war. The plot continues through the intersecting, parallel narratives of Niska and Xavier as they travel home by river from the train station. Xavier’s narrative, which composes the bulk of the novel, consists mostly of analepses

either to memories of his childhood or of the war. Niska's narrative anchors the reader in their present journey on the river while also employing analepses, relating memories of her life and Xavier's childhood to her nephew. She tells these stories as an offering of healing when she recognizes that Xavier remains in physical and mental agony from the war.

The importance of the novel's narration style is twofold: first, its approach to time in an overlapping sense marks one of the conventions of the Gothic genre, and second, its use of analepsis reflects the Indigenous worldview of the characters. In addressing the first aspect, one of the popular conventions of the traditional Gothic novel is a past that haunts the present, otherwise known as the return of the repressed. Of course the ambiguity of the convention allows this haunting to manifest itself in many ways; for example, in Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), considered by scholars to be the first Gothic novel, the characters of the novel are haunted by an injustice of the past that has left the ownership of the castle in erroneous hands. The plot is resolved when an heir of the rightful lineage regains ownership. Time overlaps in that the past never stays in the past, but affects the present in uncomfortable ways until, hopefully, the event from the past is resolved or rectified.

For the second aspect, the characters of *Three Day Road* contrast Western notions of linear, chronological time both indirectly with their narratives and directly with their speech. Their narratives defy the traditional plotline of beginning, middle, and end, instead weaving their stories with incidents from the past, present, and occasionally, visions of the future. Also as the novel weaves together past and present, the chapters

weave together the two voices of Elijah and Niska as often one character will begin the chapter only to shift to another character's story. This method collapses linear time, resulting in a more organic concept of time that coincides with the Indigenous worldview of Boyden's characters. Their narratives reflect this worldview indirectly, often beginning a chapter with the present moment but soon shifting to a memory from the past. Their narratives also reflect this worldview directly, referring to the circular nature of life and time according to their Cree paradigm.

For example, Xavier speaks directly to the novel's contrast between Indigenous and Western concepts of time while in the midst of his military experience in Europe. After spending several years under Western command, he comments, "I do not like their way of keeping time. Their way is based loosely on the moons but is as orderly as the officers try to keep the trenches, full of meaningless numbers and different names for days that are all the same anyways" (285). He rejects the Western concept of time for his own Cree concept that adopts a different methodology for time.

In support of Xavier's statement, Niska relates the story of Xavier's first hunt as a child, an experience that marked his entrance into adulthood. She reminds him of this memory as Xavier hovers between life and death in a morphine withdrawal, coaxing him back to life through her stories. She reminds him that it is natural for the past to live on in the present, that this belief is a part of their culture. She remembers, "You saw for the first time the circle. Even though you could not yet express it in words, you understood the seasons, the teepee, the shaking tent, the wigwam, the fire circle, the *matatosowin*. You saw all of life is in the circle, and realized that you always come back, in one way or

another, to where you have been before” (331). Even though Xavier’s past continues to cripple his body and memory, Niska’s words empower his memory towards resolution through an Indigenous acceptance of this haunting, expressed through a circular concept of time.

Niska’s words also prophesize to a larger movement within Indigenous and post/colonial literature. Scholar Kathleen Brogan, whose article “American Stories of Cultural Haunting: Tales of Heirs and Ethnographers” documents the ways in which African-American novels use the return of the repressed to bring a means of resolution to historical trauma, claims, “The saving movement from reenactment to enabling memory is, therefore, a movement into language. Through acts of narrative revision—which are very often presented as acts of translation, linguistic or cultural—the cycle of doom is broken and the past digested” (Brogan 156). The way in which Boyden utilizes the Gothic convention of a past haunting the present envisions not only a Indigenous interpretation of the convention—a complicated interplay of memory, narration, and a circular concept of time—but also a hopeful future for healing the trauma.

Conclusion

Skillful texts like Boyden’s *Three Day Road* do not offer a solitary interpretation, and a Gothic reading is certainly one of numerous ways to connect to its offerings. However, I believe that a Gothic reading honors those rich offerings, and provides a fresh approach to Indigenous literature that is both aesthetic and political. In addition, the contemporary relevancy of the Gothic holds many possibilities. The Gothic tradition

connects marginalized literature to a long-established genre, and its conventions of Otherness beg for a modern revision that complicates the colonial Self/Other duality. The return of the repressed highlighted in the Gothic is timely with today's often-addressed issue of historical trauma, and a myriad of other potentialities exist that the modern Gothic novel seems to breed. Furthermore, unearthing the Gothic in Indigenous texts creates a critical movement that moves beyond simply reading fiction for cultural understanding. It defies easy answers and interpretations yet provides new forms of expression and ways to talk about Indigenous literature that may in fact become a new wave in the Native American Literary Renaissance.

A DANGEROUS GIFT: THE CLASH OF EPISTEMOLOGY AND THE GOTHIC
BILDUNGSROMAN IN EDEN ROBINSON'S *MONKEY BEACH*

“What goes bump in the night in one context is the dissonant sound of a paradigm clash in another”—Jodey Castriciano

Since its publication in 2000, Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach* has inspired a growing body of literary criticism. The themes of these articles reflect the current concerns of Indigenous studies—identity, issues of representation, historical trauma, and colonization. Yet the special attraction to this novel seems to be its status as a First Nations Gothic novel and the fresh approaches to politics that the burgeoning subgenre provides. As critic Coral Ann Howells claims in her book chapter, “Canadian Gothic”: “*Monkey Beach* represents a return to the original Canadian wilderness Gothic, now told from a contemporary Aboriginal perspective, which gives a very different view of questions of inheritance, history and identity from white or ethnic-minority writing” (111). How might this Aboriginal perspective of the Gothic perform upon the text, and in what ways does the genre provide a “very different view” of Indigenous concerns?

Dualisms and the Gothic: A Note on Castriciano and the Clash of Paradigms

Jodey Castriciano's challenging and didactic article, “Learning to Talk with Ghosts: Canadian Gothic and the Poetics of Haunting in Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach*” (2006), takes up the vital differences in understandings between Western and Indigenous cultures. In its essence, her essay questions whether the Gothic tradition and its conventions, laden with Western paradigms and signifiers, can be applicable to the

Indigenous novel. This inquiry may be the most significant to the future of Indigenous Gothic studies—to what extent may critics, authors, and readers utilize Western forms, such as the novel or the Gothic, to express or frame Indigenous matters?

This question seems to be, as yet, unanswerable. Though heavily debated within African-American, post/colonial, feminist, and many other intellectual communities, no majority movement appears to lead international thinking of whether minority and/or non-Western writing in English can have successful political gains. Perhaps, however, the evidence lies not in speech but in action. Authors of post/colonial literature continue to appropriate Western conventions to question Western conventions, as do critics and philosophers. Whether or not these efforts are futile returns to the debate, but scholars such as Jodey Castriciano do well to critically engage their efforts while the world watches for the outcome.

Specifically to the questions at hand, Castriciano opens with the following: “what can the European Gothic possibly tell readers about modern Haisla culture” (803). Several points arise from her statement. First, readers of Indigenous literature must always be aware of the novel as fiction. Reading for a cultural experience walks a fine line from reading for culture, but there are important differences. The latter places a heavy burden on fiction that undermines the intention of its art, and telling a story is not the same as telling a truth in the sense that most Western readers expect. Therefore, one may be able to avoid asking the Gothic to perform upon culture and ask instead, what is it about the Gothic that offers a desirable medium for *Monkey Beach*? Furthermore, one may also ask if identifying the Gothic in Robinson’s novel might actually be an

imposition of Western ideology upon a text intent on expressing something tribally-specific? Finally, Castriciano critiques the dualisms apparent in her own question when she ends with the thought, “the challenge becomes how to talk about the cultural intersections of and clashes between certain European and First Nations epistemological, ontological, and spiritual paradigms without relying on the dualism” (812).

Acknowledging the dualisms in her criticism as well as gently problematizing the dualisms in the work of others again offers valuable insight to Indigenous Gothic studies. However, it could be possible that the text itself relies on this same dualism and clash of paradigms for an express purpose, a possibility that the following analysis will address.

All of these questions, complications, and insights help to contextualize this single novel within its larger universe. While the remainder of this essay delves into more textually-specific thoughts, hopefully this short section serves as a reminder of the larger political and intellectual implications such examinations may have. In addition, it is not through carelessness that I employ incompletely defined terms such as the uncanny, the repressed, and other trigger words to a world of connotations within Gothic, psychoanalytical, and Western paradigms. Such words are always subjective, and it is according to the usefulness as well as the spirit of the Gothic genre that I attempt to allow them some degree of subjectivity. As a final point and in appreciation of the above caveats, it is my abiding opinion that due to the highly mutable nature of the Gothic within its modes of representation, Indigenous texts can and do appropriate the Gothic within new paradigms.

Monkey Beach as Bildungsroman

Robinson's *Monkey Beach* recounts the life of Lisamarie Michelle Hill, a young woman of Haisla descent. Far from the possible reading of *Monkey Beach* as the development of Lisamarie's hallucinatory madness and subsequent attempted suicide, the novel can be seen as an Indigenous blend of the Gothic and bildungsroman, a combination that inversely and positively traces another kind of development for Lisamarie. These two possible and opposable readings present one way in which the novel might utilize dualism to assert an Indigenous perspective, in this case in regards to visions of the supernatural as a sign of mental healing rather than disease.

Told mostly through a first-person point of view, Lisamarie's achronological narrative is driven by memories recalling her childhood, not the least of which include the remembrances of the violent deaths of several family members. The return of these memories, otherwise known in Gothic terms as the return of the repressed, function in accord with the bildungsroman genre, standardly defined as "a novel that recounts the development (psychological and sometimes spiritual) of an individual from childhood to maturity, to the point at which the protagonist recognizes his or her place and role in the world" (Murfin 39). Though Lisamarie's memories do recount her physical maturity, the true focus of the novel is her spiritual maturity¹, as driven by the return of the repressed.

¹ Although this chapter explores Lisamarie's spiritual maturity within a Haisla context, I must strongly emphasize that my analysis itself is not from a Haisla context. I readily acknowledge that an analysis from this perspective may radically differ or change when compared with mine, but I hope to present one way of reading the novel that comes from a primary knowledge of the text only. I do not seek to make judgments upon or communicate opinions on Haisla spirituality as it exists outside of Robinson's fiction.

The bildungsroman may alternately be known as an apprenticeship novel (Murfin 39), which applies well to the circumstances of Lisamarie's spiritual education, as she must learn from the unwelcome manifestations of tribally-specific monsters and visions of the dead that appear to her within the novel. These monsters and visions, categorized as the uncanny within the Gothic novel, uniquely connect Lisamarie to her Haisla heritage. She slowly learns to handle the dangerous spiritual gift of visions that she has been given through spiritual mentors such as her uncle and her grandmother. They teach her to use her gift correctly through cultural stories, and although she makes mistakes along the way, Lisamarie ultimately accepts her gift and the positive forces (such as healing) that it brings to her life.

Monkey Beach thus creates a unique blend and re-presentation of Gothic and the bildungsroman in the way that it traces Lisamarie's spiritual development. Her spiritual maturity occurs as she learns to understand and control her visions of monsters and the dead through her cultural context and the mentorship of family members. This development also occurs as she releases, through memory, the repressed feelings of grief she has over the deaths of her loved ones. The following sections will analyze these dual prongs of her spiritual maturity, concluding with a return to the introductory questions about the Indigenous Gothic and its distinctive approach to politics.

Things that Go Bump in the Night: Contact with the Uncanny

Lisamarie's narrative begins at the end, so to speak, as her voice is one of maturity in the present tense. She waits to hear news of her brother Jimmy, whom she

worries is lost as sea. While she waits for news, her memories begin. These memories take up the bulk of the novel, and as typical of the bildungsroman, Lisamarie's narrative begins in her childhood. Through these memories Lisamarie also traces her encounters with what Gothic critics label the uncanny, which in this novel manifest as tribally-specific monsters and visions of the dead. For Lisamarie, the monsters and the dead are intimately linked as she gradually realizes that the appearances of the monsters portend the death of a loved one. Although these encounters and their implications terrify her, ultimately it is these supernatural beings that contribute to her healing as she grows to understand her place in the world through this dangerous spiritual gift.

Lisamarie first recalls a dream-vision of Jimmy at Monkey Beach that she had the night of his disappearance, and connects the vision to a childhood memory of her first encounter with B'gwus (Robinson 7). She explains, "When we were kids, Dad would tell us about B'gwus, the wild man of the woods. They were stories that Ba-ba-oo had told him" (7). Ba-ba-oo is Lisamarie's grandfather, and b'gwus is the Haisla term for what is more popularly known as a sasquatch. Looking for Jimmy in the forest of Monkey Beach, Lisamarie encounters a b'gwus, whom she describes as "a tall man, covered in brown fur. He gave me a wide, friendly smile, but he had too many teeth and they were all pointed. He backed into the shadows, then stepped behind a cedar tree and vanished" (16). Although Jimmy arrives on the scene shortly after the disappearance of the b'gwus, Lisamarie is the only one that sees this apparition.

Although the Haisla characters do acknowledge the white term for these monsters, sasquatch, they prefer the Haisla term and cultural stories. This tribally-specific context

enacts this Indigenous perspective on the Gothic novel, by reclaiming Gothic monsters into their cultural context. Andrews ascertains this aspect of the Indigenous Gothic when she points out, “But Robinson transports the Gothic to a Native context and, rather than depicting the Haisla characters who populate the novel as potential threats to the safety of a white, Eurocentric community, lets them form their own world, in which monsters exist but are not necessarily destructive” (Andrews 9). Monsters like the b’gwus do strike terror into the heart of both Lisamarie and the reader; however, both of these witnesses learn to anticipate the ambivalent presence of the tribally-specific uncanny.

The most important monster to Lisamarie’s narrative is the little red-haired man. He first appears in her infancy when she accidentally discovers a dying dog while playing outside (Robinson 19). The dog “whimpered and its legs jerked,” then suddenly, “Someone tsk-tsked. I looked up, and a little, dark man with bright red hair was crouching beside me” (19). Shortly after the narration of this memory she reflects, “The memories are so old that I used to think the little man and the dog in the ditch were a dream. I’m sure that was the first time I saw the little man” (20). Although here Lisamarie acknowledges her spiritual gift of monstrous vision, she relates a tone of former doubt in herself, thinking that her experience was a dream. The next occurrence of the little red-haired man, however, leaves little room for the denial of her spiritual visions.

Lisamarie’s narrative does not give an impression of her fear until this second vision at the age of six. At this age, perhaps, she has developed a sense of normalcy that gives her a fear of the uncanny. She remembers:

I jolted awake, heart thudding so hard I couldn't breathe. My jewellery box's tinkling, tinny music played, but I heard it only somewhere in the distance because I was staring open-mouthed at the red-haired man sitting cross-legged on the top of my dresser. His crinkling face arranged itself into a grin as he rolled backwards and stood. He tilted a head that was too large for his body, put one stubby finger to his lips and went 'Shh.' Frozen where I lay, I couldn't have made a sound. His green plaid shirt jingled with tiny bells as he bowed to me, then he straightened until he was standing again and stepped back into the wall. (21)

This terrifying vision appears just before a destructive tidal wave hits her village. At this point, she has no understanding of who this monster is or why he appears to her. She knows no cultural stories to place him in any context, and he has no name. Yet Lisamarie cannot deny her visions:

As I grew older, he became a variation of the monster under the bed or the thing in the closet, a nightmare that faded with morning. He liked to sit on the 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. When he was in a mean mood, he did a jerky little dance and pretended to poke at my eyes. (27)

At this point in her maturity all she begins to comprehend are these hints at his nature and the undeniable existence of these visions. As she continues her spiritual development she realizes the importance of his appearances.

Lastly, while the b'gwus and the little red-haired man are the key instances of the uncanny in the novel, Lisamarie also has other confrontations with the uncanny that broaden the range of her spiritual visions. When on a fishing trip with her uncle Mick, she recalls, "I felt a sudden chill. A white man and his son, in matching neon green and black scuba gear, stood on a point, waving to us. I stood up and waved back wildly" (91). Her youth and enthusiasm as well as her spiritual inexperience are evident in her

actions. “ ‘Who are you waving at?’ Mick shouted over the engine. He was looking at me like I was nuts. ‘You can’t see them?’ I said, lowering my arm” (91). Lisamarie realizes the scuba divers are ghosts, visible only to her. This incident and other minor ones in the novel leads to her need to understand why the supernatural appear to her—thus, her Haisla spiritual apprenticeship.

Lessons from the Dead: A Spiritual Apprenticeship

Lisamarie’s spiritual apprenticeship can be traced through four stages: identifying patterns, communicating, lessons, and mature use. Again, a Haisla context informs all these stages of her spiritual development, but Castriciano’s essay must serve as a reminder here that “The point of being an outsider to the meaning of First Nations stories has critical implications for thinking of the novel in Gothic terms” (811). I must emphasize that the following methodology of spiritual development does not come from an insider’s application of Haisla culture, but merely from an observation from a critic of the text only and the ways in which it presents the intersections of spirituality and culture.

Both Lisamarie and the reader learn to understand the uncanny through the novel’s Haisla paradigm. True to the Gothic, there remains some ambiguity in this: Robinson refuses to portray Haisla culture as static, and although Lisamarie cannot understand her gift outside of its tribal context, the traditional stories do not always fit perfectly with her visions. In addition, as analyzed in the next section, the Gothic convention of the unspeakable at times denies the apprentice methods of understanding or control that may have otherwise existed. However, Lisamarie’s spiritual development

also presents an affirming, Indigenous vision of the future and an assertion of Haisla spiritual power.

Lisamarie's first stage of her spiritual apprenticeship simply begins as she identifies her gift and its pattern. She accepts, "I understood I had just had a vision, but I was afraid to think about what it meant" (Robinson 222). Although in the context of this quotation Lisamarie is afraid to face what her vision portends of Jimmy's death, her words may accurately represent her feelings more generally. She slowly acknowledges, "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" (27). She learns to recognize that the little red-haired man visits her to portend ill, typically the death of a loved one. Although such a realization would be terrifying for anyone, Lisamarie learns to find a modicum of comfort in identifying such a pattern when she temporarily loses her gift and receives bad news. She reflects, "Until that moment, I had never appreciated the little man. This is, I thought, what it's like for everybody else. Hello, it's bad news. Bam" (283). Accepting her visions as a gift and learning to recognize its patterns lead Lisamarie to the next stage of her spiritual development—communication.

Once Lisamarie accepts her unique ability to see the uncanny, she seeks to learn why she was chosen for this supernatural vision. She identifies the pattern of the little man's visits, but she also seeks to understand this supernatural method of communication. As typical of the Gothic, there are no clear answers. Lisamarie's voice of spiritual maturity interjects itself into her early narrative to address this dilemma: "I used to think that if I could talk to the spirit world, I'd get some answers. Ha bloody ha. I

wish the dead would just come out and say what they mean instead of being so passive-aggressive about the whole thing” (17). Lisamarie and the reader must satisfy themselves with concession that there is no way to comprehend the communications of the supernatural. They remain mysterious and communicate only ambiguously or indirectly.

The one lesson about communication that Lisamarie does receive, however, is one of respect. Leading by example, Lisamarie’s mother and uncle dip their hands into the Kitlope River and wash their faces (112). Lisamarie’s mother then turns to her and instructs, “‘When you go up the Kitlope,’ Mom said, ‘you be polite and introduce yourself to the water’” (112). Although Mom and Mick do not see the supernatural in the novel, they still acknowledge the spirits surrounding them and teach Lisamarie to be respectful. They consider this an important part of raising Lisamarie in Haisla culture and spirituality, and it prepares her for the next lessons of her spiritual apprenticeship.

The next two sections represent the most important stages in Lisamarie’s spiritual maturity. The lessons that she learns in these stages control her destiny and influence the outcome of the novel. First, Lisamarie starts to manage her terror over supernatural manifestations by speaking of her spiritual education in terms of three lessons. The beginning of Part Two of the novel begins with Lisamarie’s direct narration to the reader: “Contacting the dead, lesson one. Sleep is an altered state of consciousness. To fall asleep is to fall into a deep, healing trance” (139). Although the instructions last only a paragraph, Lisamarie seems to be communicating this lesson for her own edification as well as her audience’s. Intimated in her words is a foreshadowing of the healing that the

contact with the supernatural will give her, as well as of the equal danger such a state of contact with the supernatural may hold.

Lessons two and three have the same tone and intensity as lesson one. They begin with the exact same phrasing: “Contacting the dead, lesson two” explains the importance of names to the dead, concluding with, “Names have power. This is the fundamental principle of magic everywhere. Call out the name of a supernatural being, and you will have its instant and undivided attention in the same way that your lost toddler will have yours the second it calls your name” (179-180). Again, notice the level of control and intensity that Lisamarie’s tone holds in this stage of her development. She portrays the utmost confidence in her lesson, and has learned if not to understand, then at least to manipulate her power over the supernatural.

Finally, lesson three gives information on summoning the uncanny. Lisamarie reiterates directly to herself and the reader how to conjure ghosts, again with a confident, direct, and manipulative tone. At the end of this section she explains, “If you have not contacted the dead after several tries, examine your willingness to speak with them. Any fear, doubt or disbelief will hinder your efforts” (212). Because Lisamarie talks to herself in other parts of her narrative, these lessons may very well be inculcations based on her growing experience. Alternatively, they may be an outside voice communicating lessons to her. The confidence of the voice, however, measures the progress of Lisamarie’s spiritual apprenticeship because whether or not the voice is hers, the tone leaves no doubt as to its belief in the growth of the subject.

Of course the most important spiritual lessons Lisamarie learns comes from an elder, her grandmother Ma-ma-oo. While learning lessons of ethnobotany, Ma-ma-oo teaches Lisamarie about *oxasuli*, a tall plant with leaves similar to those of a tulip (151). Ma-ma-oo describes this plant as “Powerful medicine. Very dangerous. It can kill you, do you understand? You have to respect it” (151). The use of the plant, Ma-ma-oo explains, has primary spiritual powers; it protects one from “ghosts, spirits, bad medicine” (151). Ma-ma-oo’s teachings, specifically her words of warning regarding *oxasuli*, become crucial lessons in the next and final stage of Lisamarie’s spiritual apprenticeship.

Once Lisamarie acknowledges her gift of spiritual sight and identifies its patterns, communications, and lessons, she must learn to use her gift maturely. Mostly this involves developing the wisdom to know the appropriate and inappropriate people with whom to share her gift, but at times it also includes knowing the limitations of her gift. This final lesson gives her control over her spirituality; without it she is at the mercy of potentially malevolent forces.

In spite of the loving relationship that exists between Lisamarie and her parents, she learns that her parents cannot accept her uncanny gift. Of her father, Lisamarie states, “Sometimes I want to share my peculiar dreams with him. But when I bring them up, he looks at me like I’ve taken off my shirt and danced topless in front of him” (20). Through trial and error, Lisamarie has learned of her father’s aversion to the supernatural world she envisions, and her mother responds in much the same way. Lisamarie reflects, “I told her about the little man and she gave me a hug and said everyone had bad dreams

and not to be scared of them—they were just dreams and they couldn't hurt me" (21). With a nurturing condescension, Lisamarie's mother dismisses her daughter's gift as mere delusions, responding with the same judgments that a textual interpretation of Lisamarie's descent into madness would have.

Due to the way in which Lisamarie tests the waters of her gift's public acceptance, she learns to be careful when, how, with whom she speaks of her contacts with the supernatural. Her own spirit begins to teach her, "It felt like it was something private" (80). Thus when her mother begins to worry about her odd behavior and takes her to a therapist, Lisamarie quickly learns what to keep quiet about her spirituality.

When introduced to the therapist, Ms. Jenkins, Lisamarie sees a "thing" 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" (272). As they conduct their therapy session, Lisamarie watches the thing sliding its tongue over Ms. Jenkin's neck, slightly distracted enough to state that she believes in ghosts (273). After her admission, Lisamarie sits still as "the thing unwrapped its arms from Ms. Jenkins and drifted across the room, hovering over me. It hummed like a high-tension wire" and begins to whisper in Lisamarie's ear, feeding her lies and feeding on her mind (274). She reflects, "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" (274). At the conclusion of this terrifying experience, Lisamarie continues to lie to her therapist and painfully confess to herself, "I knew it was wrong to want the

thing to feed on me again, I knew it was bad. But without it, the night was long and empty and endless” (275).

Although this scene shows Lisamarie learning with whom and under what circumstances to discuss her spiritual gift, it also shows her error in allowing this “thing” to control her, lying for her and feeding off of her. Her immature control over her visions eventually leads to much more dangerous territory, in which Lisamarie capitulates to the demands of the “thing” and nearly sacrifices her life in exchange for knowledge of her brother’s whereabouts (369-371). She is saved only through a manifestation of Ma-ma-oo, who pulls her back to the land of the living while saying, ““You have a dangerous gift. It’s like oxasuli. Unless you know how to use it, it will kill you”” (371). Finally, through these encounters with the malicious “thing,” Lisamarie matures in her use of her spiritual gift and completes her spiritual apprenticeship. She respects the power of the uncanny and learns to distrust the ones that seek to control her. She also learns to read the situations in which to keep private her capabilities, and possibly the spiritual consequences that come with untruthfulness.

Lastly, it is this therapist scene especially that marks the stark difference in dualism and paradigms between Western and Indigenous cultures. The therapist implies that she does not believe in manifestations of the supernatural other than as a sign of mental abnormality, whereas within the traditional Haisla perspective of the novel, Ma-ma-oo announces Lisamarie’s supernatural visions as a gift (151). These stark contrasts become darkly ironic as Lisamarie can see the “thing” feeding on Ms. Jenkins, who is unable or unwilling to acknowledge its existence. Not only are the two individuals at

odds, but their entire epistemological paradigms clash as Lisamarie's mental "decline" is alternately her spiritual enlightenment.

Conclusion and Beginning: A Return to the Question of Politics

This paradigm clash brings us back to the beginning to address our initial questions: how might an Aboriginal perspective of the Gothic perform upon Robinson's *Monkey Beach*, and in what ways does the genre provide a "very different view" of Indigenous concerns? In Castriciano's opinion, *Monkey Beach* "provides readers with a new understanding of the role of literary Gothic in *Western* culture in that *Monkey Beach* asks us to reflect upon the value of knowledge derived from sources often repudiated in and by the materialism of the West...." (803). Although epistemological values are at odds and it is true that the Haisla knowledge in regards to the uncanny is privileged over the Western, the way in which I see an Aboriginal perspective of the Gothic performing upon the text maintains some of the same Western Gothic connotations of horror and abnormality with the uncanny. Both Western and Haisla cultures at times patronize, at times embrace encounters with the supernatural, a trademark ambiguity of the Gothic. Both Western and Indigenous representations of the Gothic novel play with a political liminality that bridges a romanticized past and an uncertain future. In short, it is not unfeasible that the Gothic can be credited with such a versatility that even politically opposing groups may operate within the genre for different political purposes.

In short, the complications of the Indigenous Gothic novel boil down to an adoption as well as a reinscribing of Gothic conventions. For now, this new and

revolutionary may or may not dismantle the master's house, but it certainly creates a defamiliarizing of Western and Gothic epistemology that affirms the powerful growth and aesthetics of Indigenous literature.

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