Towards Indigenous Literary Nationalisms: Interpreting *Monkey Beach* and *The Marrow Thieves*

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Abstract

This paper was originally written for Deanna Reder's English/Indigenous Studies 360 course *Popular Writing by Indigenous Authors*. The assignment asked students to write a compare and contrast essay on the novels *Monkey Beach* by Haisla-Heiltsuk author Eden Robinson and *The Marrow Thieves* by Métis author Cherie Dimaline, drawing on at least one academic article for analysis. The paper uses MLA citation style.

In this paper, I argue that Indigenous literary nationalism, a method of Indigenous literary criticism which seeks to understand Indigenous literatures through their own cultural contexts, is applicable to understanding both culturally specific and pan-Indigenous instances of Indigenous literature. Using Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach* and Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves* as examples of the former and latter categories respectively, I conclude that Indigenous literary nationalism may be rethought more appropriately as Indigenous literary national*isms*, at once incorporating culturally specific Indigenous contexts while making room for pan-Indigenous potentialities.

In their collaborative paper "Canadian Indian[1] Literary Nationalism? Critical Approaches in Canadian Indigenous Contexts," a diverse group of Indigenous scholars consider the applicability of Indigenous literary nationalism to Indigenous literature produced in so-called "Canada." Indigenous literary

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[1] Dr. Deanna Reder, who participated in this interlogue, has communicated to the author that neither her nor her colleagues would use the term "Indian" in the title anymore. The original title is used here for referential purposes.

nationalism, originated as "American Indian[2] literary nationalism," is a mode of literary criticism which seeks to, in the words of Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice, "[understand] Indigenous literary expressions in part through their relevant Indigenous intellectual, cultural, political, cosmological, and historical contexts" (Fagan et al. 25). This approach is traditionally understood to be culturally specific, with Justice noting his wariness with the theory due to "the lack of substantive engagement with the nationhood or peoplehood specificities of urban, pan-Native, or multitribal literary traditions and writers" (Fagan et al. 26). To challenge this idea of cultural specificity as inherent to Indigenous literary nationalism, this paper will compare and contrast two works of Indigenous popular fiction: Eden Robinson's (Haisla-Heiltsuk) 2000 novel *Monkey Beach* and Cherie Dimaline's (Métis) 2017 novel *The Marrow Thieves*, which at first appear to work in opposite directions as culturally specific and pan-Indigenous texts respectively. By considering how Indigenous literary nationalism may be applied in reading both texts, a more expansive understanding of the theory which reconciles culturally specific and pan-Indigenous approaches may be developed.

Monkey Beach famously begins with an extended description of the physical location of its narrative, with protagonist Lisamarie Hill asking the reader to "find a map of British Columbia…drag your finger across the map…right up to the Douglas Channel" and "find Kitamaat Village, with its seven hundred Haisla people tucked in between the mountains and the ocean" (Robinson 4-5). Robinson's introduction works to establish *Monkey Beach* as foremost a Haisla literary expression, one informed by the culturally specific relationships her Haisla characters have with the land and each other. Despite her relative estrangement from Haisla culture, Lisamarie displays a great deal of traditional ecological knowledge,[3] defined by Martha Johnson (Dene) as "a body of knowledge built up by a group of people through generations of living in close contact with nature" (4). For instance, while accompanying Uncle Mick on a trip to fish for oolichans, an important staple food and natural resource in Haisla culture, Lisamarie narrates "three rivers in Kitamaat territory have reliable oolichan runs – the Kitimat, Kitlope and Kemano rivers," relating knowledge on when and where oolichan spawn and the impact on pollution on harvests: "the Kitimat River used to be the

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[2] Original terminology as discussed by Fagan et al., hereinafter referred to as "Indigenous literary nationalism."

[3] Deanna Reder has drawn the author's attention to the problematic usage of "traditional" in describing Indigenous knowledge systems. However, for the sake of consistency in referring to Johnson's definition, this paper will continue to use the term "traditional ecological knowledge."

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best one, but it has been polluted by all the industry in town" (Robinson 92). Lisamarie further narrates being told by her mother that oolichan runs in Kitimat River "used to be so thick, you could walk across the river and not touch water" (Robinson 92), demonstrating the inter-generational transmission of traditional ecological knowledge within Lisamarie's family.

Beyond these relationships with land and water, Robinson also works to establish the specific presence of Haisla culture and storytelling traditions within her text. Lisamarie experiences repeated encounters with a "little man," described as a short, red-haired man wearing tiny bells, who appears in proximity to traumatic events in Lisamarie's life. While initially scared of the little man, Lisamarie comes to "[know] he'd been trying to comfort [her]" by offering companionship in times of grief (Robinson 132). Although not explicitly stated, the "little man" is Tsooda, a spirit who, according to Haisla storytelling traditions, appeared to the historical Chief G'psgolox to comfort him after the loss of his family to smallpox (Cardinal). Other figures from Haisla tradition, such as B'gwus and T'Sonoqua, make appearances: literally, in the case of B'gwus, who Lisamarie encounters as a "tall man, covered in brown fur" early in the novel (Robinson 17), while T'Sonoqua, an ogress who, in contrast with B'gwus, is now "by and large, a dim memory" (Robinson 337) becomes associated with Lisamarie's feelings of being neglected and ostracized for her contact with the spirit world. Jennifer Andrews (non-Indigenous) compellingly argues the appearances of B'gwus and T'Sonoqua give Lisamarie the space "to describe herself…in distinctly Haisla terms…[giving] value to her talents in a context that fuses contemporary concerns with long-standing tribal narratives" (18). These and other cultural specificities, such as the settlement feast attended by Lisamarie and her family to commemorate the passing of a family member, firmly establish *Monkey Beach* as a work that can be understood through the conventional definition of Indigenous literary nationalism, lending itself to interpretation through the literary traditions and cultural knowledges of the Haisla nation to illuminate a greater understanding of the text.

What, then, could an understanding of Indigenous literary nationalism look like in considering a text such as *The Marrow Thieves*, which cannot be understood through any particular Indigenous national context? Dimaline's novel is a work of speculative fiction set several decades further into an escalated climate catastrophe which has seen mass death and societal collapse. Amidst this catastrophe, settler populations have begun to lose the ability to dream, leading to widespread insanity and suicide. Indigenous peoples, who have retained their

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ability to dream, are hunted by "Recruiters" working for the government of Canada and forcibly removed to a new form of residential schools, where their bone marrow is extracted and processed for settler consumption. The novel's teenage protagonist Francis, or "Frenchie," is a young Métis man who joins a group of Indigenous survivors from across Turtle Island on a journey north, believed to be one of the last places safe from both climate catastrophe and the Recruiters.

Dimaline's grim vision of the future is one in which Indigenous lives are not only under constant threat, but relationships with land and culture have been significantly disrupted. Frenchie is aware that his Métis ancestry places him in "a long line of trappers, hunters, and voyageurs," but that "with most of the rivers cut into pieces and lakes left as grey sludge puckers on the landscape, [his] own history seemed like a myth along the lines of dragons," rendering his people's traditional ecological knowledge moot (Dimaline 21). Frenchie's alienation from the land and water is exacerbated both by his upbringing in the "Southern Metropolitan City," i.e. Toronto, and being forced to live a life on the run from the Recruiters, relegating him and his companions to a lifestyle of "just movement, especially for [Indigenous peoples]: the hunted trying to hunt" (Dimaline 47). These conditions further serve to hinder Frenchie and other Indigenous characters' knowledge of their own cultures, referred to as "old-timey" ways, which they practice in a limited capacity by wearing their hair in braids and constructing makeshift sweat lodges (Dimaline 21-22). Knowledge of "old-timey" ways are closely kept by the group's Elders Miigwans and Minerva, as much in an effort to preserve cultural knowledge as to protect the younger members of the group from the consequences of learning such knowledge too early: Frenchie relates to RiRi, the group's youngest member, that when another member learned of "Story" – that is, the knowledge of the history of colonization and genocide experienced by Indigenous peoples from the moment of European contact until the present day – "he stopped playing, didn't want to learn anything, and even stopped sleeping so good" (Dimaline 28). These and other harsh realities of Frenchie's world dramatically alter the stakes of the Indigenous contexts used by Dimaline, outright precluding or limiting some while expanding the relevance and consequences of others.

To understand how the narrative offered by Dimaline could be understood through the lens of Indigenous literary nationalism, it is necessary to rethink the culturally specific approach exemplified by *Monkey Beach* and consider pan-Indigenous potentialities. As previously mentioned, Frenchie's group is

notable for its diversity of Indigenous nations, languages, and cultures. Frenchie and RiRi are Métis; Chi-Boy, the eldest boy in the group, "came from the west, from the Cree lands" (Dimaline 20), while Wab, the eldest girl, was raised in Toronto; Slopper, another boy, comes from the East Coast; the group's Elder and leader Miigwans is an Anishinaabe man who speaks Ojibwe and Cree dialects. Other characters, including Frenchie's love interest Rose (who is of mixed Indigenous and Black descent), twin boys Tree and Zheegwon, and the Elder Minerva are from unspecified cultures and places, but demonstrate a knowledge of a variety of Indigenous languages and cultural concepts from Métis, Ojibwe, and Cree cultures. This multi-national context gives Frenchie and his companions the opportunity to incorporate knowledges from Indigenous nations across Turtle Island into their fight for survival: for instance, using Ojibwe language to determine whether individuals they encounter while travelling are Indigenous, or being able to identify Cree syllabics as indicators of a nearby resistance encampment.

Dimaline's use of multi-nationality in *The Marrow Thieves*, a text which can still be understood through the application of the "relevant Indigenous contexts" described by Daniel Heath Justice, opens up the possibility of a pan-Indigenous interpretation of the tenets of Indigenous literary nationalism. Cree-Métis scholar Deanna Reder gestures towards this interpretation in her theorization of trickster criticism in *Troubling Tricksters*, noting that "national or tribal specific approaches are unlikely to satisfy or resonate with a growing urban Indigenous readership," and predicting a resurgence of "inter-tribal…approaches that hold within them possibilities to unify and celebrate our belonging together" (ix). Such approaches do not collapse Indigenous literary nationalism into a monolith of culturally unspecific and uninformed criticism, but rather extends the theory into celebrations of, in Reder's words, "the variety of specific national or tribal interpretations of the world" (Fagan et al. 33). Through its bringing together of characters from a variety of Indigenous nations and cultures, *The Marrow Thieves* is an exemplary text for beginning to rethink Indigenous literary nationalism as Indigenous national*isms*.

By way of a concluding case study for how Indigenous literary nationalist approaches can be reconciled in both culturally specific and pan-Indigenous texts, this paper will briefly consider the importance of Indigenous languages in both *Monkey Beach* and *The Marrow Thieves*. At the climax of *Monkey Beach*, Lisamarie is briefly transported to "the land of the dead" and witnesses her passed relations singing a song, coming to "understand the words even though they are in Haisla,"

a language she has hitherto struggled to learn over the course of the novel (Robinson 373). The song is revealed to be "a farewell song…about leaving and meeting again," concluding with the phrase "*aux'gwalas*…take care of her," bringing closure to Lisamarie's struggles with grief and trauma (Robinson 374). The transcendence of Indigenous language and song also proves key to the climax of *The Marrow Thieves*: after Minerva is captured by the Recruiters and taken to a school, she is attached to a "conductor" to begin the process of extracting her bone marrow, at which point she begins to sing in "words in the language the conductor couldn't process, words the Cardinals couldn't bear, words the wires couldn't transfer," causing a fire which leads to the destruction of the school (Dimaline 172). In both instances, language becomes a conduit towards Indigenous resurgence, with Lisamarie reconciling with her family and people and achieving healing, and Frenchie and his companions being given a tool towards fighting back against the Recruiters and reestablishing Indigenous sovereignty. This is but one example of how Indigenous literature can be understood through a particular Indigenous context, i.e. language, in a way that does not preclude engagement with "urban, pan-Native, or multitribal literary traditions and writers" such as Dimaline (Fagan et al. 26).

Rethinking Indigenous literary nationalism in such a way opens up exciting new possibilities in the application of the theory to Indigenous literatures which do not fit neatly into one particular national context. By considering how Robinson and Dimaline employ Indigenous contexts such as traditional ecological knowledge, storytelling concepts, and language towards enriching the understanding of their own fictions, it can be observed that nationalist methods of criticism are reconcilable with both culturally specific and pan-Indigenous narratives, transforming Indigenous literary nationalism into Indigenous literary national*isms*. While scholars such as Reder have provided invaluable work towards reigniting critical frameworks such as trickster criticism in analyzing such literatures, this paper hopes to have established that all hope is not lost for Indigenous literary nationalism as a means to a diverse and encompassing mode of criticism.

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