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"DRIFTING AWAY IN THE TIDE": WATER SYMBOLISM AND INDIGENOUS ENVIRONMENTALISM IN EDEN ROBINSON'S *MONKEY BEACH*

Abstract

Like the protagonist of her debut novel, Eden Robinson is a member of the Haisla First Nation, whose reserve is located in the Kitimat district at British Columbia's coastline. While Robinson's novel was published sixteen years ago, the issue of environmental pollution is even more pressing and prevalent today. Referring to ecological damages, this article will examine to what extent non-sustainable thinking, outdated government plans and pipeline projects affect British Columbia's environment nowadays. By placing nature above human and especially by highlighting the power of water, Robinson's fiction almost gains a foreboding character. The water spirituality of the Haisla Nation, as it is represented in *Monkey Beach*, has an essential position that must not be neglected or underestimated. Connecting the water symbolism with present environmental activism offers a new perspective on contemporary Indigenous environmentalism. This article analyzes how Robinson's novel raises the awareness of Indigenous ways of understanding, living with, and respecting water and the environment as something—at least—equal. Contemporary environmental activism aims at both raising awareness and changing public policy to a more sustainable as well as preservative attitude while Robinson's fiction joins this site of resistance.

Résumé

Tout comme la protagoniste de son premier roman, *Les Esprits de l'océan*, Eden Robinson est membre de la nation Haisla. Le roman a été publié il y a seize ans, mais les questions de pollution de l'environnement affectent, encore et toujours, la santé des communautés locales et régionales des Nations Premières, et ce de manière de plus en plus pressante et urgente, tant d'un point de vue écologique et

économique que culturel. Cet article traite du respect de l'eau qui est incorporé dans le « savoir écologique traditionnel » (SÉT). Par ailleurs, l'article examine comment la relation entre l'eau et la protagoniste évolue et change au cours du récit. Dans une perspective environnementale, il y a plusieurs aspects de la résistance, passée et présente, contre la pollution. Les projets néfastes pour l'environnement comme, par exemple, le projet de pipeline Northern Gateway d'Enbridge, illustrent des formes de racisme, de discrimination, et d'attitude non durable. Cette analyse montre comment le roman de Robinson sensibilise les lecteurs à l'importance du patrimoine culturel (SÉT) et au respect de l'eau et de l'environnement comme éléments spirituels et corporels – au moins dans la même mesure. Aussi l'ouvrage *Les Esprits de l'océan* soutient-il la résistance, telle qu'elle se manifeste dans l'activisme socio-environnemental indigène.

"It is possible to retaliate against an enemy,
But impossible to retaliate against storms."
(Robinson, *Monkey Beach* epigraph, n. pag.)

The First Nations writer and storyteller Eden Robinson (Haisla/Heiltsuk) opens her debut novel *Monkey Beach* with this epigraph—a Haisla proverb that indicates the supremacy of the ocean. The sublime force of nature is arbitrary; any form of "revenge" against it leads into a void. Indigenous environmental activism represents an act of resistance that seeks to rehabilitate and strengthen the reciprocal relationship between nature and humanity, paying tribute to the power of nature. In this context, the "enemy" is manifested in a chronicle of ignorance, discrimination, and marginalisation: the consequences of colonisation and industrial development have altered the circumstances of First Nations cultures on an economic, social, and ecological level. Environmental activists aim to prevent further ecological damages; for example, pollution which, due to an increasing industrial sector in general or the implementation of potentially leaking oil pipelines in particular, endangers both natural and cultural ecosystems.

Apart from touching upon the issue of retaliation and its objectives, in Robinson's novel the Haisla proverb serves as an introduction to the story of Lisa-Marie Michelle Hill, usually called Lisa, a teenage girl who was born and raised in the community of the Haisla First Nation in the 1980s. Setting out on a solitary journey along the coastline of Northern British Columbia, Lisa embarks on the search for her younger brother Jimmy, who has gone missing after he accepted a job on a seiner (Robinson, *Monkey Beach* 1-4). For Lisa, the ocean is something that is to be respected and feared: "At any given

moment, there are two thousand storms at sea" (4). At any moment, somebody can be caught off-guard by a storm at sea.

Monkey Beach emphasises the omnipresence of water as well as its connectedness to the land and its people. The sea, with its all-pervasive power of water, constitutes both a blessing and a curse in Lisa's life: on the one hand, it supplies her community with fishing grounds and food[1]; on the other, it is dangerously unpredictable when someone is trapped on the ocean, being exposed to the caprices of the weather. Moreover, Lisa struggles to interpret what the spirits, coming from and being connected to the ocean, are telling her.[2] Overall, she has an ambivalent relationship to her environment, specifically to water. Nonetheless, her story implicitly confirms that water is precious: it is a spiritual guide who deserves honour and respect (112). In her novel, Robinson also depicts the topography of the Kitamaat reserve, simultaneously showing how Lisa's attitude towards water evolves and changes. Presuming that the young Haisla woman is still in search of her identity, the question arises if she is able to reconcile her inherent spirituality, which is connected to the water, with the inevitably hybridised reality of her cultural environment.

Read from an ecocritical perspective, Robinson's novel exemplifies how an originally functioning and sustainable relationship between water and the Haisla community can become tenuous and conflicted. The narrative frequently touches upon the consequences of regional industrialisation such as the establishment of Aluminium smelters.[3] In this context, it is crucial to observe how the Haisla community is affected by such environmental challenges. In comparison to non-Indigenous cultures, ecological restoration and cultural survival are more closely intertwined notions within Indigenous cultures. Emphasising the ecocultural significance of water, the present article will examine how Robinson's novel raises the awareness of Indigenous ways of understanding, living with, and respecting water and the environment as something that is—at least—equal to human beings.

The exploration of the significance of water is embedded in Traditional Ecological/Environmental Knowledge, which is why the present article will, first of all, investigate this concept. An examination of water spirituality will then lead to two central aspects of the Haisla culture—"nusa" and "oolichan." Afterwards, examples of environmental activism will serve to underline past

[1] The oolichan fish is of immense cultural importance for the Haisla First Nation (Soper-Jones 19-20), as it will be elaborated on later in the following discussion.

[2] The French title of the novel, *Les Esprits de l'Océan*, implies the spiritual power of the ocean.

[3] For the references to Alcan/Aluminium Company of Canada, see Robinson, *Monkey Beach* 60, 163, 214, and 359.

and present sites of resistance. The subsequent literary analysis of *Monkey Beach* will concentrate on the protagonist's relationship to her environment and finally seek to answer the question how *Monkey Beach* supports the opposition against ecological damage.

TRADITIONAL ECOLOGICAL/ENVIRONMENTAL KNOWLEDGE

First and foremost, the present paper will address the concept of Traditional Ecological/Environmental Knowledge (frequently abbreviated as TEK) before taking a closer look at the significance of water. Prior to the contemplation of TEK, it is crucial to be aware of the dichotomies and discrepancies, which tend to be perpetuated in the abstract and often prejudiced context of academic thinking.[4] Intercultural research cannot be validated by a Western viewpoint alone, but Indigenous methodologies have to be included in order to secure the integrity and validity of TEK (Brant Castellano 106).[5] Commenting on the nature of Indigenous knowledge, Vine Deloria, Jr., (Sioux) remarks, "We were to gather knowledge, not dispense it" (131). In his essay "Traditional Technology," the Sioux scholar points out that science strives to observe all phenomena from an objective and rational point of view in order to be scientifically valid; to "find abstract principles underlying all behavior, from atoms to masses of people" (129). This reductionist perspective implies that nature and its inhabitants can be explained as manifestations or results of matter.[6] Modern technological innovations add to the notion of nature being under human control (129-30). As per Deloria's critical observation, modern sciences and contemporary stereotypes of Indigenous cultures tend to oppose the relevance of Indigenous knowledge, keeping it "hidden in the backwaters of anthropology, sociology and history" (130). If the knowledge of tribal peoples, "primitive peoples" (130), is consulted at all, this gesture is oftentimes accompanied by a patronising comment, and when Indigenous cultures offer a new insight, it is often assumed that "they could not have possibly understood its significance" (130). This condescending attitude creates an intellectual as well as

[4] The field of study that contemplates the acquisition of environmental knowledge from Indigenous peoples has been rapidly growing since the 1980s (Johnson 5-6).

[5] See also Linda Tuhiwai Smith's (Ngati Awa and Ngati Porou) work *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* that sets a standard for emancipatory research.

[6] In a similar vein, it indicates that feelings are to be interpreted as chemical reactions or electrical impulses within the human brain.

emotional dilemma for Indigenous peoples and displays a continuous disregard and disrespect with regard to Indigenous epistemologies.[7]

With respect to Indigenous cultures, the following vital components have to be taken into consideration: the notion of land, relations, Indigenous identity, and, most importantly, "the relationship between the land, language, culture and national identity" (13), as Hartmut Lutz points out in his "Introduction to Indigeneity and Immigration." First of all, Thomas King (Cherokee) emphasises that "land" is a "defining element" (365) of Indigenous culture: "Land contains language, the stories, and the histories of a people. It provides water, air, shelter, and food. . . . And land is home. Not in an abstract way" (365-66).[8] Associating the land with all of its inhabitants, both human and non-human, the Indigenous perception of "relations" encompasses "the relations all around – animals, fish, trees, and rocks – as . . . brothers, sisters, uncles, and grandpas" (LaDuke 2). Syilx Okanagan scholar Jeannette Armstrong claims that the reconstruction of her "Indigeneity"[9] within her community "includes the physical, psychological and philosophical dimensions of being" ("Indigenous Peoples" 3). Ultimately, the holistic conception within Indigenous cultures and traditions is apt to elicit a responsible and sustainable attitude of reciprocity to the natural environment (Armstrong, "Kwtlakin?" 29)—which provides the fundament for the present discussion of TEK.

The attempt to approach a definition of TEK proves highly challenging due to the danger of essentialising Indigenous culture and performing tribal glossing. In multiple publications, Deborah McGregor (Anishinaabe) insists on the difficulties of defining TEK ("Coming Full Circle" 385). Retracing her Indigenous origins, McGregor asserts that she inherently knew about the concept long before thinking of it as a scholarly theory—because she grew up

[7] "Too often we try to insert various kinds of tribal knowledge into the format of modern science, and the result is that we get a few points for having a historical relationship to the problem area, but the beliefs and practices that our ancestors held about certain things are believed to be merely ad hoc resolutions of the problem or lucky guesses and do not receive the credit that is theirs by right." (Deloria 130)

[8] See also King 420.

[9] In her contribution to the International Expert Group Meeting concerning the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Armstrong refers to Indigenous identity as "Indigeneity" (1). Moreover, she underlines that the basis of her knowledge, her experience, and thus her identity and culture are expressed through her Indigenous language (see "Indigenous Peoples" and "Kwtlakin?" 29, 33). On "Indigeneity," see also Armstrong's doctoral dissertation, "Constructing Indigeneity: Syilx Okanagan Oraliture and Tmix^{w}centrism."

in an Indigenous community that practises TEK.[10] Thus, she has dealt with the topic extensively—on a personal as well as on a professional level ("Traditional Ecological Knowledge" 1). The quandary of finding a suitable definition prevails, as McGregor points out in her essay "Traditional Ecological Knowledge," "Some Aboriginal scholars, such as Marie Battiste (Micmaq) and James Henderson (Cherokee), argue that it cannot and should not be defined as definitions of TEK vary from Nation to Nation and from individual to individual . . ." (1). The—typically Eurocentric—intent of reductionist abstraction results in the risk of essentialising Indigenous cultures: "reducing this diversity to more universal definitions . . . is a first step in the Eurocentric process of separating TEK from its intended context" ("Traditional Ecological Knowledge" 1).[11] McGregor continues that "[i]t is not appropriate to limit or constrain [TEK] by defining it, as it should not and cannot be removed from the people or the land in which it is based" ("Coming Full Circle" 392).

Notwithstanding these problems, Martha Johnson, former executive director of the Dene Cultural Institute in the Northwest Territories, describes TEK as "a body of knowledge built up by a group of people through generations of living in close contact with nature" (4). Additionally, it is essential to acknowledge that Indigenous epistemologies refer to the passing-on and internalisation of knowledge. Thus, its origin is firmly rooted in the past, yet relevant to the present: "In Indigenous communities themselves . . . the practice of TEK is thousands of years old" (McGregor, "Coming Full Circle" 386).[12] It entails a cumulative system of classification, including a set of observations about the local environment as well as a system that regulates resource management.[13] Moreover, it is a dynamic body of knowledge that relies on the experience of prior generations, but it constantly evolves in response to new technological and socioeconomic changes (Johnson 8-9).

Within the discourse of TEK, it is crucial to recognise the discrepancy between Eurocentric and Indigenous perceptions. As McGregor remarks, "A critical point . . . is that . . . in order for the Aboriginal knowledge inherent in this way of life to have any real meaning, you must live it: if you are not

[10] Battiste and Henderson state that "the . . . problem is that Indigenous Knowledge is so much part of the clan, band, or community, or even the individual, that it cannot be separated from the bearer to be codified into a definition" (36).

[11] See also McGregor, "Traditional Ecological Knowledge" 3.

[12] See also Brooks 235.

[13] For a further subdivision, see Houde (3-9), who differentiates between: (1) factual observations, classifications, and system dynamics; (2) management systems; (3) factual knowledge regarding past and current use of the environment; (4) ethics and values; (5) traditional ecological knowledge as a vector for cultural identity; and (6) cosmology.

living 'the good life,' you are not learning or practising TEK" ("Traditional Ecological Knowledge" 2). In other words, the concept cannot be reduced to a "body of knowledge" since TEK does not consist of knowledge *about* the environment but it *is* the relationship with the environment (McGregor, "Coming Full Circle" 394). Anishinaabe environmental activist Winona LaDuke describes TEK as "the culturally and spiritually based way in which indigenous people relate to their ecosystem" (127). Besides, TEK cannot be deterritorialised[14] since "[i]t tends to be locally distinct, place-based, set within a cultural context, and inclusive of all the inter-related components of the human-environment complex in that area" (Pilgrim and Pretty 6). The tenacity of First Nations environmentalism stems from their cultures' relation to the land and water, which is constantly "reaffirmed through prayer, deed, and . . . way of being – . . . the 'good life'" (LaDuke 4).

Even though the tradition of oral storytelling[15]—transmitting knowledge orally and via stories—is increasingly threatened by the Western habit of "writing things down,"[16] Norbert Witt and Jackie Hookimaw-Witt (Attawapiskat) explain why creating records of TEK data is indeed important. In their essay "Pinpinayhaytosowin [The Way We Do Things]," they draw upon the problem of undeniably altered ecocultural conditions "when the two different worldviews of mainstream and the First Nation collide over the different interest of management and protection of Aboriginal lands" (384).[17] Certainly, First Nations land management practices contribute to the

[14] According to current theories of globalisation, the phenomenon of inter-connectedness brings along the formation of new forms of culture that are no longer rooted in one place (Heise 12-13). In her study, Ursula Heise refers to this as a process of "'deterritorialization'" (14). It can be defined as an attempt at reconceptualising social and spatial structures independent of classifications, categorisations, or boundaries: "the detachment of social and cultural practices from their ties to place" (Garrard 6).

[15] The significance of oral storytelling is not to be underestimated, as Robinson asserts, "All our stories are oral" (qtd. in Methot). Cajete (Tewa) also writes, "Humans are storytelling animals. Story is a primary structure through which humans think, relate, and communicate. We make stories, tell stories and live stories because it is such an integral part of being human" (115). See also Howells 197.

[16] Battiste (Micmaq) comments on the dichotomy of oral versus written as follows: "Indigenous knowledge comprises the complex set of technologies developed and sustained by Indigenous civlizations. Often oral and symbolic, it is transmitted through the structure of Indigenous languages and passed on to the next generation through modelling, practice, and animation, rather than through the written word. . . . [It] is typically embedded in the cumulative experiences and teachings of Indigenous peoples rather than in a library" (2).

[17] See also McGregor, "Traditional Ecological Knowledge" 4 and Brant Castellano's elaboration on "jagged worldviews colliding" (103-04).

preservation of the environment.[18] According to Witt and Hookimaw-Witt, the protection of Indigenous knowledge in a mainstream context requires TEK data "to be collected, recorded and analyzed" (384). If First Nations are consulted and engaged in the process of land management and preservation, TEK can become a powerful tool for self-determination and self-reliance.[19]

Yet, the examination of TEK yields the daunting realisation that its continuity is threatened by environmental pollution. Extreme changes in the environment—whether they are natural or man-made[20] such as industrial carbon emissions—may render local knowledge invalid or obsolete. Aiming to prevent this from happening, First Nations environmentalism creates a consciousness for TEK. If it is lost entirely, Indigenous cultures will suffer alongside ecological deterioration (Soper-Jones 16-17). Confirming the significance of TEK, McGregor remarks, "Despite ongoing debate over its definition, TEK continues to gain importance in considerations of environmental sustainability" ("Traditional Ecological Knowledge" 2). Concluding, TEK is an essential factor that pertains to and simultaneously sustains environmentalism. Furthermore, it assists the process of raising awareness and preserving a more sustainable attitude towards the natural environment.[21]

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF WATER IN HAISLA CULTURE AND *MONKEY BEACH*

Concerning an Indigenous understanding of sustainability and respect towards nature, water is crucial. In his essay "Water: A First Nations' Spiritual and Ecological Perspective," Michael Blackstock points out that water is the origin of everything: "water is the element from which all else came; it is the primary substance within the interconnected web of life" (4). Clearly, the human being needs water to survive—still, the power of water is ambiguous since "[w]ater can be a life-offering force and a source of destruction" (Murdocca 4).

[18] As Usher points out, it is now a policy requirement that TEK is incorporated in environmental assessment and resource management (184-85).

[19] See Alfred Taiaiake (Kanien'kehaka, Mohawk) who refers to the importance of political (self-) government (e.g., 1-2, 45-46, 54). See also Brant Castellano 109-10.

[20] Elaborating on an example of ecological damage to Anishinaabeg forest culture, LaDuke comments, "When the high winds hit the reservation, the press called it a 'natural disaster.' But when lumber companies similarly vanquish the trees, it is commonly called 'progress'" (127).

[21] "To my mind, Indigenous knowledge can only increase in importance in this cycle of knowledge sharing, for the benefit of us all." (McGregor, "Traditional Ecological Knowledge" 6)

In order to stress the interdependent relation between human beings and natural elements, Mohawk scholar Brant Castellano quotes the BC Elder Simon Lucas (Hesquiaht): "The sea and its resources is the heart and soul of our people. Sea resources have sustained our people since time began for us. The health of the ocean means a healthy emotion" (103). Consequently, if the equilibrium of the oceanic ecosystem is disturbed due to environmental pollution, the spirituality, which is "tied directly to the ocean" (Lucas in Brant Castellano 103), is also "polluted" and upset.

The water spirituality of the Haisla Nation, as it is represented in *Monkey Beach*, gains an important position in the course of the story, which asserts that water has both physical and spiritual energy. The article "Honouring Water," posted on the official website of the Assembly of First Nations (AFN), depicts water as the element connecting all living beings. Most importantly, the article calls attention to the fact that "First Nations recognize the sacredness of . . . water, the interconnectedness of all life and the importance of protecting . . . water from pollution, drought and waste." Furthermore, water is a sacred spirit, teaching those who are able to listen that one can be strong and simultaneously soft, flexible, and pliable. Ultimately, the article asserts that First Nations have a close relationship with water and that they rely upon it "for drinking, cleaning, purification, and [it] provides habitat for the plants and animals . . . gather[ed] as medicines and foods." *Monkey Beach*, for instance, emphasises that water provides the habitat for the "oolichan"[22]—a species of fish that is endemic to the North Pacific Ocean and the southern Bering Sea (Soper-Jones 25).

In order to apply the concept of TEK to Robinson's fictional text and further examine the significance of water, it is pivotal to focus on the First Nation that is referred to in her story; thus, the present paper will henceforth focus specifically on the culture of the Haisla Nation. Relying on potentially unreliable resources hampers the process of writing as a cultural outsider.[23] Therefore, Robinson's work *The Sasquatch at Home*, in which she gives an insight into the complexity of the Haisla Nation concerning the traditions of family, culture, and place, proves an invaluable resource.[24] Fundamental

[22] "Ooolichan" (*Thaleichthys pacificus*) is also spelled "eulachon," but the present paper employs Robinson's spelling (originally Chinook, the Haisla word for "oolichan" is *jak'un*). For further references, see Robinson, *Monkey Beach* 78, 85, 238, and 266. See also Soper-Jones 29, fn. 4.

[23] See also Antell 15.

[24] Robinson's talk at the fourth annual Henry Kreisel Lecture in 2010 is reprinted in *The Sasquatch at Home: Traditional Protocols and Modern Storytelling,* which was published in 2011. While previous scholars were confronted with the problem of accessing the Haisla culture (Soper-Jones 18-19), Robinson herself provides a list of sources, titled

aspects of the Haisla culture can be retraced in Robinson's thoughts on her debut novel and its development, which will also contribute to the literary analysis of *Monkey Beach* (Robinson, *Sasquatch* 31-33, 37-38).

One of the most important facets of Haisla culture is "nusa," i.e. "the traditional way of teaching children Haisla *nuyem*, or protocols" (Robinson, *Sasquatch* 43). Even though Robinson was introduced to the concept of nusa in her childhood, she states that she only understood its real meaning years later (8). Curiously, Robinson gains access to the value of nusa by virtue of her mother's reaction to the Mansion of Elvis, i.e. her awe of the surroundings and her way of perceiving everything in a seemingly heightened state of emotions. As Robinson recounts, "as we walked slowly through the house and she [her mother] touched the walls, everything had a story, a history" (8) Through this specific experience Robinson grasps the essence of nusa: "In each story was everything she valued and loved and wanted me to remember and carry with me. This is nusa" (12). Yet, Robinson points out that nusa is a concept that merely members of the Haisla community can truly understand and pass on:

> As clear and complete as we want this discussion of our *nuyem* to be, it is important to recognize that the Old People realized that some things cannot be shared. . . . Nowadays, we simply realize that there are aspects of our traditional perspective and values that non-Haislas would never be able to understand. (13)

Nusa preserves Haisla knowledge and culture. Furthermore, it is a tribally specific tradition that can neither be found elsewhere nor practiced by anyone other than members of the Haisla community. Apart from this knowledge acquisition and conservation of cultural heritage, specific ecological circumstances also shape a culture's traditions, as LaDuke claims, "There is a direct relationship between the loss of cultural diversity and the loss of biodiversity" (1). Commenting on the extinction of salmon in the Pacific Northwest, the Anishinaabe activist underlines that every river is also home to a people, each as distinct as a species of fish (1). It is not by coincidence that the Haisla Nation's territory is located close to the regional oolichan runs—a species of fish that is particularly significant for the continuity of the Haisla culture.[25] Indeed, oolichan constitute an existential source of food, upon which traditional Haisla practices are based (Robinson, *Sasquatch* 19-23; *Monkey*

"Resource Material for the Curious," which is to be found in the appendix of *The Sasquatch at Home* (45).

[25] "The importance of the oolichan . . . cannot be understated, it is a cultural icon throughout its region and very present in the culture of the Northwest Coast and its development." (Hirch 2)

Beach 85-86), which are passed on from generation to generation (Soper-Jones 22)—"eons of fishermen" (Robinson, *Monkey Beach* 34).

Mirjam Hirch elaborates on the complex (cultural) history of fish on the Northwest Coast of America, highlighting that the oolichan is crucial for a culture's continued existence, just as cultural traditions regulate the population of fish. Generally, "[h]uman beings have always had to adapt their ways of life to what nature would yield, and they have developed complex, diverse, and regionally specific ways of surviving in the given areas they inhabit" (Lutz 11). The oolichan are of great importance for the survival of the Haisla Nation[26]: the catching of oolichan, processing, and distribution of oolichan grease is an "integral part and important unifying force" (Hirch 6).[27] However, this tradition is threatened by environmental pollution due to the growing industrial sector in British Columbia (Methot; Hirch 9-10; Robinson, *Monkey Beach* 92-93, 265). The oolichan and the Haisla community are interconnected and interdependent—and thus, both are endangered. As LaDuke confirms, "The stories of the fish and the people are not so different. Environmental destruction threatens the existence of both" (1). From an ecocritical perspective, Robinson's novel heightens the awareness of the nefarious consequences of environmental pollution. Here, literature acts as an observer of the environment, recording the effects of pollution as well as its repercussions in the local First Nations community. The Kitimat River is highly polluted (Robinson, *Monkey Beach* 92), just as the Kemano River is "affected by hydroelectric operations of Alcan's aluminium smelter" (Hirch 9). Most tellingly, Elder Morris Amos (Haisla) says, "The oily fish [oolichan] have picked up the pulp mill taste" (qtd. in Hirch 10). In sum, non-sustainable thinking increases the ecological degradation of British Columbia's environment—a trend that First Nations environmentalists protest against.

CONTEMPORARY ENVIRONMENTAL FIRST NATIONS ACTIVISM

Contemporary environmental First Nations activism, for instance, their protest against the Enbridge Northern Gateway Project, serves as an example of recent trends of environmentalism in the region of the Haisla Nation. The above-mentioned pipeline project, which envisioned the Douglas Channel in Kitimat as the termination point for an oil pipeline, reaching from Edmonton,

[26] See also the monthly magazine of the Haisla Nation, the *Dootilh*, on the community's website. For the most recent gathering of oolichan, see some relevant articles in the editions of March 2016.

[27] See also Soper-Jones 25.

Alberta, to British Columbia's coastline (more than 1,000 km), came to a standstill towards the end of 2015. First Nations environmental activists strongly oppose this project: Chief Councillor Ellis Ross of the Haisla Nation, one of the leading opponents against the Enbridge Northern Gateway Project, claims that First Nations were at no point involved in the design and planning process of the pipeline (Hunter and Tait). This lack of consultation shows that the voices of Indigenous peoples have been ignored—a fact that is reminiscent of the overall discrimination against and marginalisation of First Nations communities across the country. Alluding to the historical origins of the ongoing struggle, LaDuke remarks:

> Some call it environmental colonialism, others call it plain racism and privilege. The underlying problem is often quite basic, revolving around historic views of who should control land, perceptions of Native people, and ideas about how now-endangered ecosystems should be managed. (131)

In spite of scientific evidence, which may serve as a warning, oil companies continue extracting tar sands oil and creating poisonous tailing ponds without properly recycling the fresh water, which is needed for the oil extraction, back into the watershed (King 367). LaDuke even calls the tailing ponds "ecological time bomb[s]" (67), which hints at the urgency to change the situation. Commenting on profit-oriented tar sands investments, the Cherokee writer Thomas King asserts:

> It is, without question, the dirtiest, most environmentally insane energy-extraction project in North America, probably in the world, but the companies that are destroying landscapes and watersheds in Alberta continue merrily along, tearing up the earth because there are billions to be made out of such corporate devastation. (367)

The Enbridge Northern Gateway Pipeline is not the only project of this kind—several others have been planned, such as the Keystone Pipeline or the Transmountain Pipeline, to name only two more. They are supposed to transport Alberta crude from Fort McMurray to refineries and markets in the US and Canada, Kitimat and Vancouver in specific. Hence, the Haisla reserve is directly affected—alongside other First Nations territories (Authier). Serge Simon, Grand Chief of the Mohawk Kanesatake, for instance, confirms that his nation joins the resistance against environmental pollution: "Indeed an alliance of indigenous nations, from coast to coast, is being formed against all the pipeline, rail and tanker projects that would make possible the continued expansion of tar sands" (qtd. in Authier). In order to support the recognition of the voices of First Nations communities, Chief Ross—in cooperation with the BC Oil and Gas Commission—launched the Haisla National Resource Sector (NRS) Aboriginal

Liaison Program in March 2016. The program enables the Haisla Nation to take part in, or at least supervise, any project that is planned on their land (Cameron). This recent event triggers a reconsideration of both past and future developments. By referring to a Haudenosaunee teaching, LaDuke stresses how contemporary changes influence the entire ecocultural community, on a vertical and horizontal scale: "We are part of everything that is beneath us, above us, and around us. Our past is present, our present is our future, and our future is seven generations past and present" (epigraph, n. pag.).

"SOMETHING IN THE WATER": SHAPING ECOCULTURAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN *MONKEY BEACH*

Robinson's novel was published in the year 2000; yet, the issue of environmental pollution is even more pressing and prevalent nowadays. Reading *Monkey Beach* prompts the following question: How does water permeate and maybe even transcend storytelling? Intriguingly, the narrative gains a wave-like rhythm due to the memories and flashbacks that are embedded in the main plot. While the reader accompanies Lisa on her journey along the coast, the magnitude of water leaks from the past into the present: Jimmy is lost at sea, Lisa's uncle Mick has drowned, another family member has died on a boat in a storm, and a fishing boat has not returned from its journey. Lisa is "riding with the tide" when she realises that "[t]he whole family is together" as all of them are "out on the water" (*Monkey Beach* 165). Following her parents on the search for Jimmy, Lisa sets out to Monkey Beach—a place of remembrance of the relationship with her brother (13-15); a place that is framed by the dynamic element of water (296).[28]

"Love Like the Ocean," the first part of the novel, shows an appreciation of nature, reverberating the notion of honouring, gratitude, and respect. While Lisa remembers a typical summer morning, it becomes clear that the steady presence of the sea relaxes her. Contrary to her younger brother, Lisa does not enjoy jumping straight into the water as much as Jimmy does (43). However, she feels at ease in this well-known setting, taking in every detail of her immediate surroundings, such as colours and sounds, and pointedly noticing how they change when she is underwater (43). Robinson's depiction of Lisa's carefree manner does not only convey a feeling of harmony, but it also speaks of a cautious, yet pleasing and non-ambiguous approach to the element of water. Some traces of environmental pollution are noticeable in Lisa's memories: the "scattering of beer and pop cans" (41) are surely not an unusual

[28] See also Robinson, *Sasquatch* 38-39 and Howells 193.

sight at the docks. However, they exemplify a non-sustainable attitude towards nature. The ocean is merely seemingly healthy, which could be seen as a reflection of Lisa's ease of mind that is subtly affected by ecocultural challenges during her childhood.

Taking on a more negative connotation, the spirit of water enters Lisa's dreams (Robinson, *Monkey Beach* 2), which can be regarded as a way of foreshadowing her feeling about her brother's ill-fated journey (Roupakia 280). This sense of foreboding is already indicated at the beginning of the novel when Lisa perceives six crows sitting on a tree in the front garden, talking to her in Haisla: "*La'es*. . . . *La'es, la'es*. . . . Go down to the bottom of the ocean" (Robinson, *Monkey Beach* 1). The crows' cries seem like a particularly bad omen and contribute to Lisa's worries. Later, she recounts a dream about Monkey Beach in which the crows repeated their advice to "go to the ocean." One of the crows was talking to her, again in Haisla: "*La'sda*, she says. Go into the water. *La'sda, la'sda*" (135). By the end of the opening chapter, the reader realizes that the ocean's depths are bottomless, immeasurable (125). Being aware of its power, Lisa knows that the spirit of the ocean always takes what it desires—"*Exitio est avidum mare nautis* – the greedy sea is there to be a doom for sailors . . ." (46). Yet, she still seems to enjoy a sense of peace and tranquillity during her journey along the coast: "There is nothing like being on the ocean to clear the head" (138). Therefore, the ocean signifies freedom, but its depth and vastness may also stand for a futile search for meaning, which might provide obscurity rather than insight.

As the reader discovers with several of Lisa's flashbacks, Jimmy was already drawn to the water when the siblings were children; he even learnt to swim before Lisa did (Robinson, *Monkey Beach* 46-47).[29] Hence, as Lisa remarks, "It would be the worst kind of irony if Jimmy died by drowning" (40). Contrary to Jimmy's confidence in his swimming abilities, Lisa fears the water and its erratic power: "Those who know the ocean know it doesn't make friends" (46). She is astonished and scared when Jimmy dares to swim beside orcas in the Douglas Channel (353). In spite of her fear and amazement, Lisa cherishes the image of her brother in the water and his pure joy: "I hold him there in my memory, smiling, excited, telling me . . . how the water looked so much more magical when they [the orcas] were swimming in it" (353-54). His youthful character is exuberant—his reaction speaks of an excitement that represents a playfully positive relation to the water: "He dived. When he came up, he shouted, 'Come in! Come see this! You've got to come see this!'" (353). In the end, Lisa's question is answered: most likely, her younger brother did die by drowning since he chose the sea to kill the man who raped his girlfriend—his enthusiasm is replaced by violence and determination.

[29] See also Kramer-Hamstra 118.

Jimmy's intention to kill Josh can be interpreted as Jimmy's personal and emotional kind of storm. He wants to "make things right" (39). His pent-up anger is released out on the ocean like a sudden break in the weather (368-69). The crows point Lisa to the direction of the ocean where she would—and will in the end—find her brother.

Throughout the story, Lisa has eerie visions of the sea. Still, her relation to the water should not merely be seen as fear or even plain horror since it is clear that she perceives her environment as her home. Touching upon the same ambiguity, Carol Ann Howells claims that Lisa's relatedness to the sea is "awesome," but she is more than merely terrified "for it is her home place" (190). Lisa's psyche perceives scary images in and of the water; reiterated appearances are haunting her, for instance, when she sees "[a] drifting hair of a corpse" in the water (Robinson, *Monkey Beach* 131). A "tiny grey corpse of what was once a kitten, or maybe a puppy" (261) reappears in another dream as "something in the water . . . drifting out with the tide"[30] (356), which is chased by a hungry seal (356). It could be argued that her visions are trying to warn her.[31] The death of her uncle Mick mirrors her fear of the gruesome ocean creature: Lisa witnesses how a seal eats the body of Mick when he has died (140-41, 211).[32] Certainly, Lisa is afraid of the ocean or of what it might be telling her. Nonetheless, she unconsciously sleepwalks right into the surf; when she wakes up she is "standing waist deep in the ocean" (356). Altogether, the sea imagery is a dominant feature in Lisa's mind, expressing her fear along with an inherent respect for nature.[33] While the crows are calling her to the water, testing her ability to communicate with the spirits, her underlying uneasiness and fear is further worsened by the oceanic pollution that upsets the reciprocal relationship of her culture with nature.

Due to the increasing industry in Kitamaat territory and its environmental effects, the richest oolichan run—the one in the Kitimat River—has basically gone extinct. The fish from that river cannot be eaten any more, as Robinson points out via Lisa's point of view: "The Kitimat River used to be the best one, but it has been polluted by all the industry in town, so you'd have to be

[30] A similar phrase from the novel, i.e. "drifting away in the tide" (370), is quoted in the title of this article.

[31] Lisa has several visions of a little man resembling a leprechaun, who also tries to warn her a number of times when something bad happens to her beloved ones (Robinson, *Monkey Beach* 21, 131-32, 222, 234, 254, 259).

[32] His death could be seen as a punishment for the "crime" of loving his sister-in-law (Appleford 94).

[33] For further sea imagery, see Robinson, *Monkey Beach* 1, 2, 4, 7, 12, 13, 17, 18, 40-44, 46, 60, 125, and 138 (to name just a few examples from the first section of the novel). See also Hauzenberger 111.

pretty dense or desperate to eat anything from that river" (*Monkey Beach* 92). Thus, Lisa's cultural and traditional relationship to the environment is complicated and obstructed by ecological degradation (Roupakia 286). In fact, Lisa envisions a healthy, unpolluted environment in her dreams—like a better version of nowadays' situation. "When I dreamed, I could see things in double exposure – the real world, and beyond it, the same world, but whole, with no clear-cuts, no pollution, no boats, no cars, no planes" (Robinson, *Monkey Beach* 265). Lisa's "double exposure" visualises a better world. A world that is complete, in which the environment is healthy and ecologically intact (Soper-Jones 28-29).

The second part of the novel, "The Song of Your Breath," refers particularly to the significance of TEK as well as storytelling (Howells 191). "Breath" may be interpreted as a metaphor for the tradition of oral storytelling in the form of nusa, which is practiced by Lisa's grandmother Ma-ma-oo. While Ma-ma-oo teaches Lisa Traditional Ecological/Environmental Knowledge in the form of nusa, Lisa's uncle Mick, being a former American Indian Movement activist, shapes her political stance. Both Ma-ma-oo and Mick cultivate Lisa's consciousness of her natural surroundings, but they do so in very different ways (Howells 195; Roupakia 285).[34] By virtue of nusa, Lisa gains a personal and cultural relationship to the flora and fauna surrounding her. As Agnes Kramer-Hamstra points out, the ecology "represent[s] a land that speaks, that is resonant, and demands respect" (117), which ties back in with the respect for the ocean (Robinson, *Monkey Beach* 265). When Mick and Ma-ma-oo introduce Lisa to the ecological household of Kitamaat, the young Haisla woman learns to appreciate nature and sees it from a different angle (*Monkey Beach* 73, 76-77). Hence, she realises and implements TEK; as Kramer-Hamstra puts it, "Lisamarie's narrative carries a tone of awe and wonder as Mick and Ma-ma-oo invite her to share in their knowledge of the Haisla creation story and the wisdom gained through their generations-old relationship to their traditional territory" (118). Discussing notions of TEK, Sona Purhar observes that the survival of the Haisla culture may be endangered since some band members are assimilating into a modern North American society, which hampers the preservation of cultural traditions (51). In Robinson's fiction, Lisa does succeed in reconnecting with the traditions of her tribe—"the question remains," Purhar continues, "as to whether she can regain her place in traditional Haisla society or if Western suppression has closed forever the door on the Haisla past" (51).[35] Environmental activism raises the awareness of sustainability while it

[34] For Ma-ma-oo's teachings, see Robinson, *Monkey Beach* 148-54, 211, and 271; while for Mick's influence on Lisa, see 30-31 and 56.

[35] See also Roupakia 283.

retaliates against cultural oblivion at the same time—Lisa's story can contribute to both sites of resistance, exploring the corresponding ecosystem as well as emphasising the cultural richness of the Haisla Nation.[36]

Figuratively speaking, the story is coming full circle in "The Land of the Dead," the last section of the novel. In the first part, the bottom of the ocean had been described as a zone of death (Robinson, *Monkey Beach* 124-25). In the last part, Lisa repeatedly shifts between the spiritual sphere of death and reality (372, 374). After she has offered her blood to the spirits in exchange for finding Jimmy (Mrak 8-9), she begins to drown, echoing the opening lines of the novel: "Go down to the bottom of the ocean" (Robinson, *Monkey Beach* 1). Her reconnection to spirituality enables her to enter the realm of the dead and communicate with them (Robinson, *Monkey Beach* 372-73; Howells 193). She is on Monkey Beach when the novel comes to an end—the site of remembrance turns into a site of resolution where spirituality and reality collide. The scene can be read as Lisa's survival, a positive interpretation that "opens a way of cultural memory and psychic healing" (Appleford 196).[37]

The story of the young Haisla woman is not only apt to spark a certain curiosity with regard to culture, but its transcultural teaching of Haisla knowledge is also likely to appeal to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous readers.[38] Especially with regard to the implicit dissemination of TEK, it could be argued that First Nations fiction such as *Monkey Beach* has the capacity to maintain notions of ecology, environmentalism, and culture. Within the study field of ecocriticism, this ties in with Hubert Zapf's idea of literature acting as a medium of "cultural ecology."[39] Arguably, the function of *Monkey Beach* is

[36] For a discussion on the problematic issue of cultural specificity, see Dobson's essay, in which Dobson states, "this essay is left reckoning with the ways in which *Monkey Beach* is being absorbed into the everyday processes that celebrate Canada's diversity and differences without recognizing the specificities of cultural heritage" (66).

[37] See also Howells 196 and Roupakia 289.

[38] See Appleford 99; Howells 183; and Lacombe 255, 260.

[39] "Cultural ecology is a new paradigm of literary studies which posits the living interrelatedness between culture and nature as a primary source of literary ethics and creativity" (Zapf, "Absence" 83). Going beyond the evident connection of a story being intertwined with the environment it is set in, Zapf argues that literature gains an "ecological potential . . . within the larger system of cultural discourses" ("New Directions" 155; see also 146-47). In his study *Literature as Cultural Ecology*, Zapf establishes a link between literature and ecology, as well as he discusses literature's function to sustain the ecocultural sphere, suggesting a "triadic functional model," according to which there are three functions of fiction: "[1] Literature as cultural-critical metadiscourse, [2] imaginative counter-discourse, [3] and reintegrative interdiscourse" (155; see also Zapf, *Literatur* 63). The first function describes how a deformed and dominant society imposes a "civilizatory power" (*Literature as Cultural Ecology* 156) and potentially traumatises or paralyses an

thus one of a "reintegrative interdiscourse" envisioning the reintegration of an excluded or oppressed culture back to the cultural reality, "through which literature contributes to the constant renewal of the cultural center from its margins" (Zapf, "New Directions" 158). The process of reconnecting, however, does not re-establish an all-encompassing harmony. Rather, it results in "conflictory processes and borderline states of crisis and turbulence" (Zapf, "New Directions" 158). With regard to *Monkey Beach*, Zapf's idea of a "reintegrative interdiscourse" can be interpreted as a creative renewal of Lisa's identity in response to changes in her cultural and ecological environment (Roupakia 286-87).[40] The readership gains an ecocultural consciousness, specifically referring to the one of Lisa's community—by virtue of the author's depiction of the Haisla reserve and topography, including the sea, mountains, lakes, and rivers.[41]

Altogether, *Monkey Beach* conveys a transcultural teaching of knowledge as an instance "of translation across cultural gaps" (Howells 186), integrating TEK as a means of cultural and ecological survival. The conjunction of literature and TEK, as represented in Robinson's fiction, contributes to First Nations environmental activism by reintegrating the culture and its knowledge into the cultural reality of today. Lisa's story and struggle with her Haisla spirituality thus serves as an example of Zapf's notion of literature as "cultural ecology" and specifically of literature as "reintegrative interdiscourse." As far as ecology is concerned, the spirit of water gains a transcendent quality—not only speaking to the protagonist but to the reader him/herself via Robinson's storytelling. The possibility of retaliation against the storm of environmental pollution enforced by the growing industrial sector has to be pursued with a critical eye. Withal, the creative energy of literature has a regenerating power that shall not be underestimated (Armstrong, "Kwtlakin?" 29). Acting as "a call to responsibility" (Castricano 812), *Monkey Beach* joins the site of resistance against ecological degradation and thus supports First Nations environmental activism as well as cultural survival. It is possible to retaliate against a non-sustainable mindset—by raising the awareness of nature and its

individual or a larger minority. The second function depicts a powerful enabling of a marginalised culture—"the culturally excluded is foregrounded and charged with special aesthetic energy" (157). For the explanation of the third function, see my discussion in the main text.

[40] Besides the protagonist, there are other characters who struggle with the reintegration to their cultural reality, e.g. Mick, the former AIM activist released from prison (Robinson, *Monkey Beach* 25-26); Lisa's brother Jimmy, who quits his swimming career after an accident (321, 324, 349); or Lisa's friend Pooch, who shoots himself (311-12).

[41] See Robinson, *Monkey Beach* 4-5, 27-28, 40, and 111-12. For an in-depth analysis of space in *Monkey Beach*, see Sarkowsky 332.

capacities. Supporting ecological restoration, one can learn from Lisa's story and seek to understand, respect, and honour water, following Robinson's advice inherent in *Monkey Beach*, just as Lisa's mother and Mick teach her to greet the River Kitlope: ". . . be polite and introduce yourself to the water . . . so you can see it with fresh eyes" (112).

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