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“The Politics of Storytelling”: Reflections on Native Activism
and the Quest for Identity in First Nations Literature:
Jeannette Armstrong’s *Slash*, Thomas King’s *Medicine River*,
and Eden Robinson’s *Monkey Beach*.

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Declaration of Authenticity

I confirm to have conceived and written this paper in English all by myself. Quotations from other authors and any ideas borrowed and/or passages paraphrased from the works of other authors are all clearly marked within the text and acknowledged in the bibliographical references.

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Abstract (in English)

First Nations literature is a rather new field of literature, which was recognized as a distinct literary category only in the mid 20th century. Since then, First Nations authors have tried to work against stereotypical images about themselves by means of writing and have aimed at a more authentic portrayal of indigenous peoples from a Native point of view.

In my analysis of the three selected novels – Jeannette Armstrong's *Slash*, Thomas King's *Medicine River*, and Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach* – I point out two of the themes that can often be found in First Nations literature; firstly, the portrayal of political activism that constitutes a rebellion against government policies; and secondly, the quest for identity of the protagonist, which happens in relation with the Native community and the homeland.

By analyzing and comparing the three novels, I came to the conclusion that although they differ greatly in the genres, styles and structures applied – *Slash* is a very realistic account of the “Red Power” era, *Medicine River* is a humoristic parody on the cultural differences of Natives and non-Natives, and *Monkey Beach* depicts the quest for an adolescent lost at sea in the form of a Gothic novel that shows relations to the world of spirits – the themes mentioned are central in all three works of fiction. This means that the novels all comment on the influence politics has had on the lives of Natives and illustrate that it is important to come to terms with cultural traditions in order to find one's own identity as a Native person.

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1. Introduction

Canada has always been a multiethnic and multicultural country. Yet, it had been a long struggle to recognize its ethnic diversity, and only as late as the 1960s the Canadian government eventually acknowledged its multiplicity, which manifests itself in policies such as the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act* (1985) or the *Official Languages Act* (issued in 1969 and amended in 1988). In spite of the implementation of policies that recognize and promote the understanding of multiculturalism, ethnic minorities in Canada have suffered from exploitation and subjugation until today.

What is noteworthy, however, is the fact that since the official recognition of multiculturalism there has been a significant rise in First Nations literature, which stems from a need to work against clichéd images by conveying narratives from a Native point of view. This is due to the fact that

our people [Natives] have been stereotyped, misunderstood and misrepresented in many ways. This has been damaging and exploitative. People need to tell their own stories, whatever culture they're from in order to relate to one another in a more truthful sense. (Armstrong, qtd. in Williamson 126)

First Nation writers have begun to publish novels that deal with the influence of politics on their everyday lives. Most prominently, these are events happening at the time of the “Red Power” movement in the 1960s and 1970s in both Canada and the United States.

With their novels, the authors strive to overcome the obstacles that represent cultural gaps and biases. Moreover, their portrayal of political aspects as well as the dilemmas that indigenous peoples face in daily life both operate as an attempt to build bridges between the diverse cultural groups.

One problematic in the analysis of First Nations literature is cross-cultural interpretation; in other words, the fact that it is predominantly done by white scholars who apply Western criteria of structure and style which are not always accurate. According to Ruffo, ‘[it] is not to say the [Native] novel is incomprehensible to a non-Native audience but rather that it operates according to different levels of understanding and, hence, meaning’ (“Inside” 163). Therefore, to get a deeper insight into the respective culture and to analyze the works of fiction in a more serious and appropriate manner ‘is a question of cultural initiation, of involvement and commitment, so that the

culture and literature itself becomes more than a mere museum piece, dusty pages, something lifeless' (Ruffo "Inside" 174).

My thesis is informed by my endeavor to unlearn racist stereotypes and to gain knowledge of racial and cultural differences between white and indigenous peoples of Canada. I am aware of my cultural background as a European woman, and I know that my efforts to interpret First Nations literature can never fully grasp the understanding and knowledge of Native peoples. In this respect, I want to emphasize that this thesis has its own cultural limitations and biases. Nevertheless, I consider it necessary to aim for a balanced, informed, and respectful analysis of the selected novels, as far as this is possible from a Western point of view.

In order to work against a biased analysis, I will mainly rely on sources by Native literary critics and authors and only include Western criticism and reviews if they seem well researched and culturally respectful.

There are many terms to refer to the aboriginal population of Canada; some are more and some are less prejudiced and clichéd.

Although the politically correct use of the terms "aboriginal" and "indigenous" includes the Inuit, this ethnic group falls beyond the scope of my thesis. Furthermore, I will apply the term "First Nations" as a more general category in order to avoid repetitions, even though it particularly refers to "status Indians" in Canada. These three terms are used interchangeably to allude to peoples misnamed as "Indians" after the first contact with Europeans. To emphasize the multiplicity of these cultures, I will refer to them in plural whenever possible. Moreover, I will use the terms "white", "Western" and "non-Natives" as synonyms for the mainstream society in Canada.

The main argument of my thesis is that there are prevalent themes in First Nations literature which set these novels apart from other works of fiction. First and foremost, these are the issue of political activism and the quest for identity. In my paper I will point out that political aspects still have an influence on contemporary novels, although many literary critics assume that there has been a shift away from political aspects to more creative approaches in contemporary First Nations literature.

Chapter 2 centers upon the socio-historic background of First Nations peoples in Canada, whereby I will trace significant political events and movements of the "Red

Power” era and focus on discriminatory policies like the residential school system or the “White Paper”, which aimed to assimilate Native peoples into mainstream society. I will point out how political guidelines affected the indigenous population in their daily lives. Furthermore, I will outline the historical background of First Nations literature, starting at the first publications in the 19th century and moving to the more journalistic and political writings from the 1920s to the 1970s, and ending with a review of more innovative novels at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century.

The relevance of Chapter 3 lies in the general outline of the selected novels, in which I will particularly discuss the genres, styles and structures applied. Here it becomes clear that although the selected novels tackle similar themes, they are very diverse in their stylistic elements.

In Chapter 4, the focus lies on the political aspect of storytelling; in other words, how writing constitutes a political act for First Nations authors because thereby they are able to work against stereotypical images. Furthermore, I will illustrate the portrayal of individual and institutional racism and will refer to the political events discussed in the novels by means of symbolism, intertextual reference, reflection and direct narration.

As a final point, Chapter 5 deals with the individual and communal search for identity. I will briefly comment on the concept of identity and point out how the protagonists develop from a renunciation of their heritage to an acceptance of their cultural traditions and thus find a place in society. Moreover, I will discuss in how far the quest for the self is related to nature and the Native community, and how orality is significant as a literary device to establish discourses that are more authentic and more appropriate to the cultural backgrounds of the authors.

2. First Nations Literature and its Contexts

2.1. Socio-historical Background

Before I will go into detail about the development of First Nations literature in Canada and its characteristic features, it is important to analyze the political events that influenced and motivated First Nations authors to put their experiences and thoughts in writing. These are events that range from the first contacts with European fur traders and settlers to the establishment of treaties and reservations, up to political events in the 20th century that still determine the lives and economies of First Nations peoples today.

Although my focus is on the phase of Native activism and ethnic mobilization in the 1960s and 1970s, often referred to as the “Red Power Era”, I will also portray some of the major events of the late 19th and early 20th centuries that led to this distinctive political period. I will concentrate on the developments in Canada, although some parallels have to be drawn between Canada and the United States, since political events took place simultaneously and “Indian movements” formed on both sides of the borders, which influenced one another.

2.1.1. Colonial Impact and the Influence of Residential Schools

Before the arrival of Europeans in the “New World” in 1492, there was an ethnically pluralistic society of indigenous peoples with numerous different languages and a broad variety of cultures and traditions that had been cultivated for thousands of years.¹ When Europeans settlers claimed their possession of what was known by most aboriginal people as “Turtle Island”² and continuously expanded westwards, indigenous peoples were profoundly affected in every aspect of life: on the social, economic and political level. As Nagel observes, ‘most Indian tribes confronted the threat of extinction from disease, slavery, war, and forced removal’ (4) due to the contact with Europeans. Not only had the Native population been reduced by 90% due to the spread of diseases like

¹ For a more detailed analysis of the development of the indigenous population of North America see Nagel, *American Indian Ethnic Renewal*, or Weyler *Blood of the Land*.

² “Turtle Island” was the common name for what later became Canada and the United States. See Ladner 120.

smallpox and tuberculosis as well as attacks by European invaders³, but they were also deprived of their territories.

One major aspect of the issue of land claims was the difference in the perception of ownership of the land. Although Europeans in Canada were relatively dependent on the knowledge of indigenous peoples about resources and settlement and hence were in close contact with them, there was the common conception of the land as “*terra nullius*” (Ladner 122) among non-Natives. This was due to the fact that the indigenous population did not claim possession of the land, because in the opinion of most aboriginal people land cannot be owned but merely used in agreement with other tribes of the area.⁴ A statement that exemplifies the attitude of many government officials during the 18th and 19th century was made by a newspaper journalist of the *British Colonist*, Amor de Cosmos: ‘Shall we allow a few red vagrants to prevent forever industrious settlers from settling on unoccupied land?’ (qtd. in Weyler 282). It was this claim of non-possession that “allowed” colonists to declare entitlement to the land, although this was only permitted in mutual agreement with indigenous peoples, which led to the establishment of treaties.⁵ Hence, when British loyalists to the Crown were granted aristocratic titles and property of the “unsettled land”, indigenous people remained with only a fraction of their original territories. According to Thornton, the areas that were “reserved” for indigenous peoples ‘served as a mechanism to further political, economic and social control of the occupants’ (14). As a consequence, the economic basis of Native tribes declined dramatically.

In addition, there were other regulations such as the pass system⁶, restrictions on fishing and hunting rights⁷ or the ban to own any land outside the government

³ See Weyler 269.

⁴ See Dickason 266f. Moreover, in the article “Sharing one Skin”, Jeannette Armstrong talks about the conception of Okanagan people who are bound together by “land, blood and love” and consider themselves the “protectors of the Earth”. They perceive land as something that can be used and parted with if necessary, which deviates from the Western conception of the possession of land.

⁵ See Ladner 121. Although treaty making was very common between indigenous nations, they had a different conception than British government officials: While Native people believed to be agreeing to a renewable relationship, the latter considered treaties as single contracts with binding validity. Furthermore, it has to be noted that there are some areas in Canada where no treaties were signed, in particular in British Columbia, which led to a different legal situation there. See Thornton 14f.

⁶ The pass system determined that non-Natives were not allowed to do business at the reserves without the agreement of an Indian agent. See Thornton 15.

reserves⁸, which all contributed to the decrease of economic self-sufficiency and independence. Since then, indigenous peoples have faced the problems of economic dependence, poverty and subjugation.

In Canada, the major political regulation to deal with the ‘Indian problem’ (Ladner 107) and for the ‘gradual civilization of Indian Peoples’ (Weyler 272) was the *Indian Act*, established in 1876. Although there has been much controversy about the document from its adoption until today⁹, it is still valid at present due to its absorption into the Canadian Constitution in 1982, when aboriginal rights were included in the constitution and the three groups of aboriginal peoples of Canada (First Nations, Inuit and Métis) were officially recognized.¹⁰ As a legal document, the *Indian Act* serves as a nation-wide framework that defines the terms “bands”, “band members” and “reserves” and regulates the status of Indians. For the first time, the law distinguished between “status” and “non-status” Indians and “Eskimos” (Inuit)¹¹, which split Native societies into two groups that were/are legally treated differently.¹² The fundamental purpose of the *Indian Act*, though, was the assimilation of indigenous peoples by eliminating tribal systems and by converting tribal regulations into municipal laws.

The evaluation of the *Indian Act* at the time of its implementation differed greatly, ranging from the conviction that it fostered governmental restriction, control and the attempt to impose “white” ideas on Native peoples to the protection of Natives and their economic and social “advancement”.¹³

⁷ Of particular interest is the Fisheries Act in 1889, which prohibited First Nations to sell fish unless a fishing company occupied them. See Weyler 284.

⁸ See Weyler 282.

⁹ For instance, the Mohawks of Akwesasne or the Plains Cree opposed the installment of a colonial regime under the *Indian Act*. Also, it is referred to as the *Indian Act* system of a “puppet government”, see Ladner 106.

¹⁰ See Chartrand 20f. He also argues that questions of definition are tied to the issue of recognition, and that Canada needs a clear definition of “Indian, Métis and Inuit” as well as a classification of the collective boundaries of these three groups.

¹¹ See Thornton 12.

¹² Daniels states that due to the definition of “Indian”, federal policies, such as the entitlement to a life in a reserve, are only valid for registered Indians. See Daniels 12.

¹³ For a historical overview of the establishment of *Indian Act* and the controversial views on the legal document, see Olive Patricia Dickason 182-185.

In order to “advance” and assimilate Native peoples, the government adopted a number of laws at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, which fostered the suppression and eradication of indigenous traditions and cultures. To exemplify this fact, the government banned traditional feasts such as the “powwow” or the “potlatch”, in which gifts were offered to all guests, because it went against the government’s perception of private property. Furthermore, traditional rituals like the “sun dance” were prohibited because they went against missionaries’ religious beliefs.¹⁴

Due to these major intrusions by the colonial government, critics have often argued that indigenous peoples were not only deprived of their domains but also of their cultural heritages. As Weyler writes,

The Canadian assault on indigenous nations was not only a seizure of land, but also an attempt to eradicate the indigenous cultures and assimilate them into the European version of civilization. (287)

One of most sinister strategies of assimilation was the implementation of the Canadian Residential School system in 1893.¹⁵ Frankly, the main purpose of such “reeducation camps” (Weyler 288) was the eradication of Native languages and cultures and the absorption of First Nations into ‘civilized Canadian society’ by the mid-twentieth century.¹⁶ This was thought to be done by educating them in social, political, economic and domestic fields of Western traditions.

According to Trevithick, indigenous children were taught ‘many of the skills necessary to take up a place among the lower orders of White society, and which would impart to them loyalty and deference to upper class White authority.’ (50)

Since Native peoples usually did not agree to “white” education, children were often forcefully taken away from their familiar surroundings and the embrace of their

¹⁴ The regulation on dances and songs had tremendous impacts on indigenous peoples because these were considered gifts from their gods. For a more thorough analysis of government regulations of indigenous rituals and traditions, see Dickason 184, and Weyler 287f.

¹⁵ Originally, there was a distinction between “industrial” and “boarding schools”, until both types were subsumed under the term “residential schools” in 1923. See Thornton 13. While in industrial schools, Native pupils learned domestic and industrial skills to serve in inferior positions, the purpose of boarding schools was rather to educate Natives to lead a life at the reserves, teaching them only the basic skills that the government considered necessary. See Trevithick 50.

¹⁶ See Churchill 12.

relatives with the help of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), and displaced to remote boarding schools for long periods of time.¹⁷

Most residential schools were sponsored by the state but run by religious organizations, e.g. the Oblates' St. Philip's Residential School in Saskatchewan or the Kenora Roman Catholic School in Ontario. Hence, a major aim of residential schools was Christian religious education and the adoption of Christianity with the simultaneous condemnation of traditional spiritual beliefs. Furthermore, it is documented that teachers used negative commentary about Native traditions, and physical punishments like whipping or washing the mouth with soap were part of the daily routine. Moreover, "sameness and order" was made possible by military-style haircuts and the renaming of children, and using Native languages in residential schools was strictly prohibited and also harshly punished. All these measures promoted a denunciation of traditional values and modes of life, which led to an emotional trauma for many of the Native children, 'destroying their sense of themselves as Indians' (Churchill 19).

The effects of residential schools are manifold, i.e. emotional numbing, somatic disorder, anxieties, sexual dysfunction, alcoholism and drug addiction, and suicidality, to name but a few.¹⁸ As analysts estimated, the residential school system displaced thousands of people from the 1830s to the 1970s¹⁹, and led to the deaths of a considerable percentage of the children due to physical and sexual abuse, malnutrition and/or poor health care.

It was not until the 1970s, mainly due to the economic burden of residential schools, that Natives were gradually allowed to contribute to the content of education and finally manage their own schools.²⁰ Again, it has to be emphasized that residential schools were a 'systematic attack to the cultural and spiritual lives of Native peoples' and led to the 'promotion of negative Native stereotypes' (Thornton 14).

¹⁷ See Churchill 18. In his book *Kill the Indian, Save the Man. The Genocidal Impact of American Indian Residential Schools*, Churchill claims that the system of residential schools can be compared to the Holocaust since thousands of people were separated from their familiar surroundings with little or no direct experience of the foreign cultures and suffered physical and emotional harms (physical, biological and cultural genocide). My description of the residential school system is largely based on Ward Churchill's very detailed analysis of residential schools in both Canada and the United States.

¹⁸ See Churchill 68-76.

¹⁹ Most residential schools closed during the 1970s, although the last was open until 1984. See Dickason 228.

²⁰ The first school completely controlled by Natives was Blue Quills in Alberta. In 2005, about 500 schools were run and operated by Natives. See Dickason 229.

2.1.2. Political Organization as a Form of Resistance

Due to the residential school system and other discriminating practices, First Nation peoples gradually began to establish political organizations, which tried to work against such inequality before the law and in daily life.

Although it is said that the period of Native political institutions started in the 1930s, it is well documented that Native North Americans organized themselves inter-“nationally” (pan-tribally) even before the first contact with Europeans.²¹ To exemplify this claim, the Haudenosaunee were an alliance of indigenous peoples ‘with a long democratic tradition and a constitution hundreds of years old’ (Ladner 120).

At the beginning of the 20th century, political confederations and organizations began to flourish, which managed to bring divergent interests and beliefs together. This is why coastal indigenous bands of British Columbia formed the “Allied Tribes of British Columbia” in 1911 to collectively fight for the recognition of their land rights.²² During the 1920s, confederations such as the Indian Defense League of America made the first efforts to defend Native concerns on both sides of the border.²³ A decade later, the Defense League petitioned against discriminating laws produced in the two capitals Washington and Ottawa, in particular against the *Indian Reorganization Act*.

Moreover, after 400 years of cultural decline, indigenous peoples began to use traditional symbols such as feathers or buckskin jackets to emphasize their cultural pride, which marks the beginning of a new era of cultural revival and reawakening.²⁴ A letter written to President Truman by Hopi leaders in 1949 illustrates that during the time of a growing globalization and the Cold War, indigenous peoples believed that it was time to return to their traditional customs: ‘We speak truths that are based on our own tradition and religion [and] know it is time for us to speak and act’ (qtd. in Treat 18).

As Nagel comprehensively describes in *American Indian Ethnic Renewal*, cultural proliferation was noticeable in many parts of North America from the 1920s

²¹ For instance, Teuton mentions the very important and powerful League of the Iroquois, which as organized across cultural and geographic boundaries. See Teuton 5.

²² See Weyler 285, and Dickason 231.

²³ See Treat 15. The border was insofar important as it was installed by Western governments and hence was not acknowledged by indigenous peoples. They were granted the right to freely travel and trade across the border.

²⁴ See Treat 16f.

onwards, which is also reflected in the increase of the Native population.²⁵ She argues that

[during] these years there has been a steady and growing effort on the part of many, perhaps most Native American communities to preserve, protect, recover, and revitalize cultural traditions, religious and ceremonial practices, sacred or traditional roles, kinship structures, languages, and the normative bases of community cohesion. (6)

This means that a national trend to reclaim heritage and to terminate social and cultural suppression was noticeable. However, traditional rituals like dances and powwows did not only contribute to the rise of cultural pride, but there were also a form of overcoming trauma on the individual as well as the collective level. Nagel calls this development “ethnic renewal” and defines it as ‘the process whereby new ethnic identities, communities, and cultures are built or rebuilt out of historical social and symbolic systems’ (10). In this respect, indigenous peoples do not simply reach back to traditions that are hundreds of years old, but creatively come up with renewed and revitalized versions of their heritage. The cultivation of traditions is therefore seen as a process in which cultural knowledge is altered so that new modes of identity, which fit into a modern society, derive.²⁶ Again, it has to be noted that cultural proliferation was accompanied by an increasing interest for political action.

According to Dickason, it was the revision of the *Indian Act* in 1951 that ‘heralded a new era’ (230) for indigenous peoples in Canada, which was prompted by the rising protests of First Nations activists and organizations. The major change was the establishment of particular tribal councils for indigenous peoples. While government officials considered this transformation as a step towards more self-determination for indigenous peoples, most Natives opposed the policy because they still thought of it as too suppressive. Instead, indigenous peoples argued for sovereignty as a “real” form of liberation.²⁷

²⁵ See Nagel 83-112. By the use of statistics he illustrates that population growth amongst indigenous peoples was not due to better infrastructure (health care, etc.) but due to changes in ethnic identification.

²⁶ See Treat 22.

²⁷ See Dickason 230f.

Simultaneously, policies were issued in the United States that aimed at more independence of Native Americans, but also for lesser financial and economic support by the government due to the rising costs of Indian welfare. Indigenous peoples, however, claimed that they were not ready to handle affairs without financial backing due to the long period of oppression, and therefore argued for a development of their economy, educational institutions and health care services before terminating the federal control. One of the major political institutions in the United States to observe and report on Indian concerns was the Task Force on Indian Affairs. Due to its recommendations, the “New Trial” policy was issued by the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, which promised equal citizenship rights and participation in American life.²⁸ However, the policy also aimed at the assimilation of Native Americans into American mainstream society and culture.

2.1.3. Significant Political Events of the “Red Power Era”

In the light of the growing efforts to assimilate Native peoples into Canadian and American society, the Red Power movement formed as a major political movement of Native peoples, which aimed to work against the subjugation enforced by the hegemonic authorities. It is due to this important political pressure group that the politically active phase of indigenous peoples in North America has often been referred to as “Red Power Era”.

The Red Power movement (or “American Indian Movement”, AIM) derived from the National Indian Youth Council in 1964, which borrowed the slogan from the Black Power movement in the United States, and their demand was self-determination for indigenous peoples and the freedom from injustice and patronization.²⁹ As Teuton argues, ‘[a]ware of the history of pan-tribal alliances, Red Power activists developed a new, more sophisticated form of resistance to American imperialism’ (5).

²⁸ See Jackson and Galli 100-104; 120f.

²⁹ See Josephy 13f. In his book *Red Power. The American Indians’ Fight for Freedom*, he gives an overview of the Red Power movement and articulates the aims and concerns of indigenous peoples from the perspective of a Native person. Also, Waubageshig edited a collection of essays by Canadian Native people called *The Only Good Indian*, which was published in 1970. These articles comment on issues such as identity, the Indian youth, politics of patience, treaty rights or the Red Power movement, and due to the Native authorship they superbly capture the zeitgeist of this political era.

Although they started out as a young, urban organization that wanted to confront imperial authorities with intellectual weapons, they soon dropped their peaceful means and became a more physical force. Due to their aggressive fighting spirit³⁰, AIM activists were sometimes referred to as “Red Muslims”, who were said to advocate ‘a race war against the whites’ (Josephy 14). Natives, however, did not mean to fight against white people as such, but against the stereotypes that were imposed on them by white people and against the suppression of their “Indianness”.³¹

The militant style of the Red Power activists, however, stood in opposition to the more traditional approach of other Native political organizations. Their aim was to fight in a pacifist manner and to return to their cultural traditions, which was believed to bring back unity and strength.³² However, this is not to say that political activists did not use traditional approaches for their activism. On the contrary, Native peoples used traditional songs and drums at marches, Indian clubs were founded at universities to keep Native people aware of their identity, and at some commencement ceremonies, graduates wore war bonnets and Indian dress to show their cultural pride.³³

According to Treat, the ‘traditional movement was [also] intertribal and transnational, nationalist and populist, intergenerational and prophetic’ (Treat 22). Thus, what is noticeable at the end of the 1960s is the political organization of indigenous peoples into alliances which crossed borders of bands and nations. This is marked by the fact that the “League of Nations” renamed themselves “Pan-American Indians”, by the formation of the National Indian Brotherhood (NIB) in Canada in 1968 and by events like the Unity Convention of 1967, in which hopes for united efforts against territorial and cultural intrusions were expressed.³⁴

Still, the government did not know how to handle the problems and claims of Native peoples. In 1966, then, an important document called the “Hawthorn Report”

³⁰ When the movement was founded, most Red Power activists were university students or intellectuals. Their aggressive character was also influenced by readings about racism such as Franz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* or *The Wretched of the Earth*, in which he promotes the idea that colonization and suppression can only be overcome in a violent manner. Waubageshig takes up this idea in his essay “The Comfortable Crisis”, in which he shows how colonialism worked in Canada and how it can be defeated. See Waubageshig 74-102.

³¹ See Josephy 16f. He characterizes “Indianness” as Indian cultures, life styles, organizations, and values and thinking.

³² See Treat 22.

³³ See Jackson and Galli 102.

³⁴ See Treat 22-29.

was issued. It analyzed the situation of Native North Americans and provided 151 recommendations about how to deal with Indian affairs.³⁵ Instead of using of this thorough study, however, the Canadian government under Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau published and adopted the famous “White Paper” in 1969, which was seen as a ‘breathhtaking governmental recipe for equality’ (Dickason 232). While Hawthorn advised to give Natives equal citizenship but additional rights, the “White Paper” sought to ensure sameness with other Canadians by terminating all treaties and by abolishing the reserves.³⁶ It is needless to say that First Nations peoples did not consent to the suggested policy and thus responded with the “Red Paper” or “Citizens Plus”,³⁷. Eventually, they were successful in persuading the government to revise the “White Paper”.

Nevertheless, the “White Paper” was a landmark in Canadian Native history insofar as it encouraged more and more Native people to react to government policies. One of the most important events, which was significant for Native people on both sides of the border, was the occupation of the deserted prison on Alcatraz Island by fourteen Native people in 1969 and 1970. United as the “Indians of All Tribes”, the activists emphasized the spirit of unity amongst indigenous peoples and served as an indication for agreement and action as well as a ‘symbol of the Indians’ new determination to go on the offensive for their rights’ (Josephy 19).

In the following years, Native activists used various methods to enforce their concerns and beliefs. To exemplify, they installed roadblocks as a form of demonstration against border violations of the Canadian government, and in some instances they were even successful in persuading the authority to recognize their right to freely pass and trade across the border of Canada and the United States.³⁸

³⁵ Harry B. Hawthorn was appointed to investigate the social and political situation of “Amerindians” in 1964. In his analysis, he depicts how outsiders were running the reserves. Furthermore, he came up with recommendations for the government about how to deal with Native concerns. The report was well-received by Natives, but not taken into account by the government. See Dickason 231f.

³⁶ See Dickason 232f, Weyler 291, and Treat 33f.

³⁷ See Dickason 233. Also, Waubageshig’s essay collection holds an article by the Indian Chiefs of Alberta named “Citizens Plus”, which depicts this policy in great detail. See, Waubageshig 5-41.

³⁸ According to the *Jay Treaty* of 1794, Native North Americans are allowed free movement and trade across the 49th parallel. See Treat 29f.

Furthermore, they arranged caravans to symbolize how Natives planned to 'retake the country from west to east' (Weyler 42). Most prominently, the "Trail of Broken Treaties Caravan" in 1972 became an important element of Native history. Hundreds of indigenous people showed their empathy by marching to Washington, D.C., in several caravans shortly before the presidential elections. What is noticeable about the "Trail of Broken Treaties" is the change in tactics, since the focus of political affairs shifted from supranational to tribal issues, from civil rights to treaty rights, and from cities to rural areas (reservations). Thus, it linked traditional segments of Indian society with urban affairs and encouraged more and more people to join political activities.³⁹ Although the campaigners achieved much support on their way, they were refused any logistical assistance in D.C., which led to barricades in the Bureau of Indian Affairs offices, violent conflicts, the destruction of State property, and eventually to assurances by the Nixon government (which were later denied).⁴⁰

Another notable demonstration was the blockade of "Wounded Knee" at the Pine Ridge reserve in early 1973, although it proved the ambivalence of reservation people towards protests by urban Indians and the divisions inside Native communities between traditionalists and assimilationists.⁴¹

On the forefront in the fight for self-government were also the issue of land claims⁴² and the discussions over fishing rights. The so-called "fish-ins" mainly took place on the West coast of North America and were main platforms for negotiations and debates, but also involved "illegal" fishing activities.⁴³

As a final step, the "Longest Walk" from San Francisco to Washington was the last major event of the "Red Power Era", which was carried out in 1978 to call attention to the continuing problems of Native North Americans.⁴⁴

³⁹ See Nagel 168f.

⁴⁰ See Weyler's chapter on "The Trail of Broken Treaties", 35-57.

⁴¹ See Nagel 170-73.

⁴² Indigenous peoples asked for the return of Native land that was held by the Crown (and later by the Canadian government), and for compensation for land that was given up. See Weyler 293.

⁴³ In these areas, fishing was legally restricted for indigenous peoples in spite of their entitlement stated in various treaties. See Nagel 161, and Treat 23.

⁴⁴ See Nagel 175f.

Lastly, it has to be noted that the media played an essential role in the fight of Native peoples, since the latter were able to utilize modern technology such as radio and TV broadcasts as well as newspapers articles for their polemic speeches and for the organization of political activities. Also, they obtained much-needed attention by the media, i.e. the highly publicized occupation of “The Rock”.⁴⁵ Such visibility in the media did not only provide a public forum and helped to educate the population about current and historical problems of Native people, but it also facilitated the transmission of tactics.⁴⁶

On the other hand, the media worked against indigenous peoples by depicting Native activists according to their prevalent stereotypes: as “bloodthirsty savages” and warlords (although only a splinter-group was militant).⁴⁷ This was generally achieved by the use of exaggerations or the installment of biased reports.

To sum up, it can be said that impressive speeches, civil rights activities, and Indian Power movements with different approaches mark the “Red Power Era”, the political decades of the 1960s and 1970s in North America.⁴⁸

Due to the importance of politics during these years and its impact on the lives of indigenous peoples, it is not surprising that First Nations and Native American writers began to publish literary works of all genres that tried to capture the spirit of political activism. It was their aim to portray the political organization of Native peoples against suppression and assimilation in their own, Native perspective, and by doing so, to work against hegemonic discourses.

Before I will go into detail about my three selected novels, I consider it necessary to trace the development of First Nations literature in Canada in order to put the chosen works of fiction in the context of indigenous literary production. Moreover, it is crucial to critically reflect on the definitions and categorizations of Native literature.

⁴⁵ See Josephy 17, and Treat 27; 34.

⁴⁶ See Nagel 167f.

⁴⁷ See Weyler 51.

⁴⁸ See Treat 25.

2.2. Literary background

2.2.1. "From the Oral to the Written" – A Historic Survey of First Nations Literature⁴⁹

There are common assumptions that First Nations literature originated from the contact with European settlers and that their literary production has flourished since the 1960s and 1970s, when more and more indigenous people began to publish works of fiction. Such suppositions, however, are misleading since they derive from a Western point of view in which writing is considered the only form of literature. Native peoples had produced stories and songs for thousands of years and had transmitted them orally long before colonization. This kind of oral literature has been 'systematically ignored' (Kamboureli 8) for a long time, since the terms "oral" and "literature" itself form a contradiction when regarded from a Western perspective.⁵⁰

According to the Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature, oral literature was conveyed through storytelling and ceremony, which 'included all types of myths, legends, tales, and folklore, [as well as] a wide range of songs, ritual chants, drama, poems, prayers, and orations' (OCCL 383, s.v. Indian literature). Although oral forms of literature served as amusement and entertainment, they often had a didactic purpose such as the communication of tribal history, principles and ways of life and codes of behavior. Hence, they helped to strengthen individual and communal identities.⁵¹

However, it is important to keep in mind that the indigenous peoples of Canada did not have a shared literary origin, which is due to the fact that there was a multitude

⁴⁹ In this brief overview, I will focus on Native literature produced in English only, since it is my focus in this paper and I believe that productions in other languages need to be considered separately.

⁵⁰ See Petrone *Native Literature* 4. Her analysis forms the basis of my historical overview, since it is one of the few very precise and specific works about oral and written literature by First Nations, and it has often been quoted and referred to by other literary critics. Her other texts, i.e. *First People, First Voices* and "Indian Literature" in the *Oxford Companion for Canadian Literature*, are, generally speaking, a summary of the main ideas of the study mentioned above. However, the fact that the history of First Nations literature relied heavily on Penny Petrone's study was criticized by Stephanie McKenzie when she argued that although it forms a valuable reference tool, the analysis is not sufficient. Hence, she calls for a further examination of the "close corpus of wisdom literature, guided by gentle instruction and honest aesthetics". See McKenzie 84.

⁵¹ See Petrone *Native Literature* 3f; 12. It is stated that George Copway distinguished three different categories of oral literature: the Amusing, the Historical, and the Moral. Arnold Davidson supports this idea when he claims that stories must not be regarded as mere entertainment. See Davidson "Coyote" 175.

of indigenous bands with different languages and their own cultural traditions and heritages.⁵² When regarding oral literature, thus, it is necessary to observe the distinct cultural and social context in order to understand and interpret stories accordingly.

As Penny Petrone explains in her extensive analysis of *Native Literature in Canada*, First Nations peoples ascribed certain connotations to spoken language: In their opinion, ‘words did not merely represent meaning. They possessed the power to change reality itself’ (Petrone 10). This means that through stories the audience as well as the spirits that were talked about could be influenced and changed. To elucidate this last claim, it is noteworthy that there was and still is a recurrent pattern in indigenous stories of supernatural powers, animal-people and guardian-spirits, animal totems, journeys to other worlds and the like.⁵³

Another characteristic of oral literature is the use of figurative language, analogies, symbols and metaphors (i.e. words like road, tree, fire, chain, sun and pipe carried a certain meaning), which are interpreted differently according to the cultural context. The application of these literary devices, however, contributed to the fact that oral literature was often misunderstood and misinterpreted by European traders or government officials.⁵⁴ As McKenzie points out, in some cultures stories were not to be shared and were subject to protection. In this respect, narratives were regarded as private property, which implied that only a small corpus of cultural assets was made available to Europeans.⁵⁵

It was not until the 19th century that the first indigenous writers began to produce their own literary works in English. These were usually Christianized aboriginal people who obtained an education by missionaries and used their knowledge ‘to encourage compassion and support for the ‘poor Indian’’ (OCCL 384) in the form of sermons, journals, letters, autobiographies or histories.⁵⁶

⁵² See Petrone *Native Literature* 9.

⁵³ See Petrone *Native Literature* 17.

⁵⁴ Ibid 5. Symbols and metaphors were also found in letters by literate indigenous people written to the colonial government, and in treaties that were established between colonizers and indigenous peoples, which can therefore be regarded as early records of “Indian Literature”. See OCCL 384, and *Native Literature* 60ff.

⁵⁵ See McKenzie 36.

⁵⁶ Ibid 35ff. For instance, Petrone mentions Reverend Peter as the first indigenous Methodist minister, who also translated books of hymns and a short dictionary into Ojibway.

One of the precursors of 20th century Native literature in Canada was George Copway (Ojibway), who published the first tribal history in 1850, *The Traditional History and Characteristic Sketches of the Ojibway Nation*. He paved the way for many other authors who recorded a chronicle of their tribal past. The best-known First Nations author to publish poetry and short stories at the end of the 19th century was Emily Pauline Johnson, who became famous for her poems “The white wampum” or “Canadian born”.⁵⁷

At the beginning of the 20th century, a trend towards journalism was noticeable as more and more indigenous people became literate. Journalistic writing was also influenced by the foundation of the political organizations of Native peoples, since newspapers and periodicals were an important source of political information and opinions.⁵⁸ When considering the political and social developments of Canada from the beginning to the middle of the 20th century, which I have outlined in the previous chapter, it can be observed that literary production developed correspondingly.

On the one hand, there were more indigenous authors who produced polemical forms of writing, which had an influence on the public and were often a reaction to political events. As Teuton argues, there was ‘an upsurge of interest in Indians to publish the crucial texts defining Red Power’ (3). For instance, Harold Cardinal wrote his famous *The Unjust Society: The Tragedy of Canada’s Indians* (1969) as a lengthy and detailed refutation of the “White Paper” issued⁵⁹.

On the other hand, there was an increase in creative works in English that is worth mentioning, which comprised a wide range of genres: fiction, poetry, song, autobiography, short fiction, drama, and storytelling. According to Hartmut Lutz, these productions ‘moved into the area most easily recognized as “literature” (*belles lettres*) in a conventional European/Eurocentric sense’ (“Sixties” 180).

Although critics have argued that the official bilingual status of Canada made it even more complicated for aboriginal writers to be acknowledged,⁶⁰ there was a great

⁵⁷ Ibid 43; 78.

⁵⁸ See McKenzie 84ff.

⁵⁹ See McKenzie 44, Petrone *Native Literature* 112, and Lutz “Sixties” 172.

⁶⁰ As Karrer and Lutz claim, First Nations writers only had the opportunity to be published if they wrote in the two official languages. However, the advance of English and French as the

increase in the literary production of First Nations writers in the 1960s and 1970s, which led to the fact that the period is sometimes described as “Native Renaissance”. This term, however, does not imply that indigenous peoples were “silent” in the decades before this period of “reawakening” and did not produce any form of literature, but their literary works were not part of the mainstream and therefore hardly recognized.⁶¹ Furthermore, a number of books were written earlier but not published until the 1960s, since authors of minority groups did not have control over the media and the publishing industry.⁶²

There is a disagreement about what the most common form of literature was in the 1960s and 1970s: While Penny Petrone argues that fiction was the most widespread genre⁶³, Hartmut Lutz claims that indigenous writers by and large produced poetry. He assumes that it ‘may have to do with structural affinities between poetry and certain ritualized forms of orality’ and because ‘writing a short poem may be a more feasible undertaking than the sustained and costly effort of writing a full-length novel or drama’ (“Sixties” 180).

Naturally, it is impossible to give an account of all the important indigenous writers of the 20th century. However, I will give a few examples of writers who mainly contributed to the development of First Nations literature.

One of the most influential works, which is regarded as a turning point in Native literature and sets the standard for autobiographical writings and fiction still to come, was *Halfbreed* by Métis writer Maria Campbell.⁶⁴ As the author explains in the preface

languages of minority writing caused a central problem for indigenous authors, since it was not their Native language. Therefore they had to develop literary strategies such as bilingual publications, code switching or overcoding. See Karrer and Lutz 24f.

⁶¹ See McKenzie 33-40. The term “Native Renaissance” is taken from McKenzie’s *Before the Country*, in which the author analyzes to which extent the growing body of indigenous literature influenced non-Native Canadian writers, and examines the aesthetics of Native literature as well as the need for new theories when discussing this form of literature.

⁶² See Karrer and Lutz 20; and Lutz “Sixties” 176. Lutz sees as problematic that Native authors did not have the same access to publishing as mainstream writers did, and hence their works were often re-narrated or edited by non-Native ethnologists.

⁶³ See Petrone *Native Literature* 130. She claims that “poetry lagged behind prose”, but some “managed to be published”.

⁶⁴ See for instance McKenzie 106f; Lutz “Sixties” 179. Furthermore, Dudek argues that Marial Campbell created a new kind of language that reflected the influence of Native languages on English, and hence proved that even dominant languages are not unchangeable. See Dudek 98.

of the novel, it was especially written for a non-Native audience to explain cultural differences and informing uneducated readers about the problems and restraints of Native people. This ‘chronicle of injustice and suffering’ (McKenzie 108) triggered the production of other works of literature that aimed to portray the obstacles and frustrations of indigenous peoples in a mainstream society as well as the political events of the 1960s and 1970s in a realistic manner. Some well-known novels of this period are i.e. Lee Maracle’s *Bobbi Lee: Indian Rebel*, Beatrice Culleton Mosionier’s *In Search of April Raintree*, and Jeannette Armstrong’s *Slash*. These narratives are said to give an accurate account of the zeitgeist of this era, to challenge the social context and hence to contribute to the understanding of indigenous cultures. As David Brundage asserts, ‘not just Native societies but all our societies are desperate for healing’ (46), and the production of such literary texts add to an individual as well as a collective healing of First Nations peoples.

As mentioned earlier, there were other genres that have experienced a substantial proliferation until today. To name but a few, Basil Johnston can be seen as ‘one of the leading short-story [sic] writers’ (Petrone *Native Literature* 123), while Tomson Highway was a main contributor to the birth (or re-birth, since performance is a main constituent of indigenous ceremonies) of the Native drama. His most famous play *The Rez Sisters*, which gives a deep insight into the lives of seven women on an imaginary reserve, enjoyed equal success with both Native and non-Native audiences. On the whole, Native drama tackles social problems of First Nations peoples such as drug addiction, suicide, family violence, racism, loneliness, and environmental concerns. The achievements and popularity of Native drama are also reflected in the development of new locations for production and performance, i.e. the “Native Theatre School” or the “Native Earth Performing Arts Company”.⁶⁵

Moreover, the production of children’s literature⁶⁶ was a new development in Native literature, since the distinction between an adult and a young readership did not exist in most indigenous cultures. As Jeannette Armstrong states in an interview,

the stories in terms of their text and their texture are not different whether or not they are for a person six years old [sic] that’s reading it. The reason for literature

⁶⁵ See Petrone *Native Literature* 172ff.

⁶⁶ Ibid 179. Petrone names significant children’s books such as Armstrong’s *Enwhisteeetkwa* (1982) or *Neekna and Chemai* (1983).

remains the same, which is *story*, basically. (qtd. in Isernhagen 144, emphasis by Isernhagen)

This is also the reason why Western critics have often dismissed Native literature as simple, plain and non-scholarly. The problems of academic criticism will be addressed in more detail later.

First Nations literature of the late 1980s and 1990s, then, marked a shift away from a political form of literary production to a new, creative style of writing as a reaction to and a reflection of the swift changes of political and economic conditions. As Petrone argues, this also has to do with the fact that a ‘younger generation of university-trained writers’ (*Native Literature* 138) emerged, which had the enthusiasm to create something innovative and original. Since this period, authors such as Thomas King, Ruby Slipperjack, and Eden Robinson have begun to move away from the focus on political issues towards works of fiction that artistically combine modern and traditional lifestyles.

The writers aim at a portrayal of First Nations peoples in connection with the everyday problems of contemporary life in Canada, in which the ‘alignment of the two cultures is more a matter of parallels than of hierarchy’ (Davidson “Coyote” 193). These novels are set in the present and do not seek to portray history, however, they still incorporate the ‘continuing values of our culture [and] the usable past that the concurrence of oral literature and traditional history provide us with.’ (“Godzilla” 246), as King argues.

Moreover, the literary period of the 1980s and 1990s opened up an ‘appropriation-of-voice debate’ (Hoy *Native Women Writers* 7) since indigenous narratives and styles were also becoming more and more appealing to non-Native writers. According to Northrope Frye, this had to do with the fact that ‘in their imaginations, [they were] no longer immigrants but becoming indigenous, recreating the kind of attitudes appropriate to people who really belong here’ (qtd. in McKenzie 122). What is apparent in ‘books about aboriginals but not by them’ (Young-Ing “Estrangement” 185) is the utilization of prevalent stereotypes and dichotomous portrayals of divergent cultures. Hence, First Nations writers reacted in a way that they

tried to come up with their own perspectives and distinct aesthetics in order to work against the “theft of their stories” by non-Native authors.⁶⁷

2.2.2. “*Search for One’s Own Voice*” – *Distinct Style and Common Themes*

When examining the development of First Nations literature, it becomes obvious that indigenous writers had to face many obstacles before they enjoyed worldwide attention and success. In particular, the publishing market in Canada was discriminatory in a way that ‘Aboriginal peoples have historically been blocked from equitable participation in the publishing industry [and thereby] silencing the Aboriginal Voice’ (Young-Ing “Estrangement” 181).⁶⁸ Jeannette Armstrong confirms this statement when she argues that

[i]t is ultimately the market that determines what gets published as literature – it even determines what is and what is not considered literature. This situation has very serious consequences for native publishing. (“Life-writing” 35)

Due to such a form of discrimination, authors like Lee Maracle started their own publishing houses,⁶⁹ which dedicated themselves to the works of Native writers. Amongst these small and independent publishers are “Pemmican Press” in Winnipeg or “Theytus Publications” in Penticton, the first publisher in Canada under First Nation ownership and control, which solely publishes First Nation writers. Other publishing houses such as “Talon Books” in Vancouver, “NeWest Press” in Edmonton and “Fifth House Publishers” in Saskatoon do not exclusively publish First Nation literature but try to integrate them to a large extent.⁷⁰ As Greg Young-Ing argues, it is important to finance and support initiatives for indigenous writing so that ‘the Aboriginal Voice would once again flourish and assume its rightful place in contemporary literature’ (“Estrangement” 187).

The inclusion of Native literature into the canon of contemporary Canadian literature, however, raises questions concerning the concept of Canadian literature as

⁶⁷ See Hoy *Native Women Writers* 7.

⁶⁸ In Armstrong’s anthology *Looking at the Words of our People*, Greg Young-Ing published an essay on the marginalization of indigenous literature in the publishing industry. He believes that it can be seen as a form of racism, and calls for action to work against it.

⁶⁹ See Kambourelli 3.

⁷⁰ See Petrone *Native Literature* 138.

such. As Kambourelli argues, the inclusion of writers who do not belong to the mainstream was an important move towards a revision of the perception of Canadian literature,⁷¹ although further steps have to be taken to ‘dispel the ‘marginality’ attributed to those authors’ (Kambourelli 3). Such discussions about the marginal position of indigenous literature on the publishing market and in the literary canon require a revision of the adequateness of definitions and classification as well as the problems of reviewing First Nations literature.

Up until now, academic critics have not been able to reach a consensus on a definition of First Nations literature. This fact is stressed by Thomas King, who writes that

when we talk about contemporary Native literature, we talk as though we already have a definition for this body of literature when, in fact, we do not. And when we talk about Native writers, we talk as though we have a process for determining who is a Native writer and who is not, when, in fact, we don’t.”
(*Relations* x)

Part of the dilemma to identify First Nations literature is the difficulty to define what “Native” means. According to Helen Hoy, the discussion of the term “Native” has to be held in a critical manner since there is firstly the risk of a male-dominated definition according to the *Indian Act*, and secondly the danger of homogenization of Native peoples.⁷² As mentioned earlier, indigenous cultures in North America are very diverse in their traditions and rituals, which creates not *one* homogeneous Native culture but separate entities. This opinion is very much promoted by Jeannette Armstrong, who claims that the various forms of First Nations all have ‘unique sensibilities’ (qtd. in Kambourelli 4) and for that reason have to be seen as heterogeneous. To exemplify this fact, she claims that her mother tongue, Okanagan, is a language with a thousand-year-

⁷¹ In *Making a Difference*, Kambourelli brings together various discussions about the concept of Canadian literature. Her aim is to change the common perception about multicultural literature as separate from the main literary tradition of Canada to the acceptance of Canadian literature as multicultural *per se*, with authors deriving from a multitude of cultural backgrounds and traditions. Janice K. Keefer calls this conception of the nation “polylogue” (63). For a further discussion of the topic see also Eva Darias Beautell “Touching the Future: Nation and Narration in Contemporary English Canada”. In my paper, however, it is not possible to tackle this very interesting issue if and how First Nations literature could be seen as part of a broader concept of Canadian multicultural literature.

⁷² See Hoy *Native Women Writers* 19-25. She has a closer look at the definitions of the categories ‘Native’, ‘Woman’, ‘Writers’ and ‘Canada’. Furthermore, Thomas King raises the questions of who is perceived as Native and who is a Native writer. See King *Relations* XI.

old tradition, which gives her an exclusive knowledge that others do not possess.⁷³ Hence, when it comes to the concept of “Native literature”, one has to raise the question whether it is even possible to define such a body of texts.

There are some literary critics who share the belief that a defined body of literatures that stands in opposition to Western texts can be identified. For instance, Young-Ing argues that ‘[t]hroughout the 1980s and early 1990s writers [...] have further developed Aboriginal literature to the point that it now stands alone as a distinct body of literature’ (“Estrangement” 184). In the opinion of McKenzie, this is due to the fact that ‘Aboriginal-Canadian literature exposes a fundamental difference between the developmental history of Canadian literature and First Nations literature’ (49), because the former did not derive from ancient, mythological roots while the latter has a long and continued tradition of storytelling. This approach is referred to as “indigenism”⁷⁴ or “pan-Indianism” (i.e. McKenzie 41), and derives from the spirit of the 1960s and 1970s that First Nations cultures show resemblances due to their related attitudes and due to the rather similar historical experiences, and thereby constitute a unity through diversity. As Damm puts it, ‘some of what we share is the result of having been treated in similar fashion’ (14).

With the concept of “pan-Indianism” as a basis for the definition of “First Nations literature”, the category seems more useful. Nevertheless, one has to reflect on the criteria that are applied in a “pan-Indian” approach. As critics of the attempt to subsume a corpus of Native literature reason, there are only a few valid themes indigenous writers can tackle in order to be considered “Native”. For instance, Sewell sarcastically states that if an indigenous author does not write about

Our oppression, Our experiences as drunks and druggies and prostitutes, how we miraculously Found Our Culture and got healed, and Eagles and/or Bears and/or Wolves [...], one hears that their work is not Native enough. (20f)

To rephrase her argument in more academic terms, there is the question of authenticity of First Nations literature, since aboriginal writers are expected ‘to re-present a museum’s type of culture and message’, which leads to the ‘ghettoization of “Indian art”’ (Eigenbrod “Not Just” 79). This view is shared by critics such as Krupat and Hoy,

⁷³ See Armstrong, qtd. in Kamboureli 7f.

⁷⁴ Ward Churchill explains that “indigenism” builds on traditions that have developed over thousands of years and make up bodies of knowledge and codes of values. See Churchill, qtd. in Krupat *Red Matters* 11.

when they argue that putting indigenous writings into *one* category of First Nations literature is yet another form of reserve in a continued process of colonization.⁷⁵

When keeping this criticism in mind, one question logically arises: How, then, can we talk about and analyze First Nations literature? One of the writers who manage to subsume the divergent opinions is Thomas King. He believes that although there is no clear definition of the term “First Nations literature”, the appearance of Native literature ‘has opened up new imagination for a non-Native audience’ (*Relations* xi). As he elucidates,

the advent of written Native literature has provided Native writers with common structures, themes, and characters which can effectively express traditional and contemporary concerns about the world and the condition of living things. [...] The sheer bulk of this collection [...] will provide us with a matrix within which a variety of patterns can be discerned. (*Relations* x)

This notion is taken up by Kristina Fagan, who claims that although there is much discussion about the authenticity of indigenous literature, ‘little attention has been paid to what might be unique in Native literature’ (243). Her main criticism is that indigenous literature ‘must fit into current critical and theoretical thinking to be popular within the academy’ (240), which in her opinion is a form of romanticizing and idealizing indigenous peoples, making them “good guys” as being politically non-biased and non-suppressive.⁷⁶

This argument leads to one further problematic in the study of First Nations literature, namely the fact that although literature is to a large extent produced by Native writers, it is almost exclusively reviewed by non-Native academics in Western institutions.⁷⁷ Therefore, the perspective from which Native literature is perceived and criticized has to be put into question.

As Mikhail Bakhtin argues, ‘[w]e judge on the basis of what we are’ (qtd. in McKenzie 91). This view concurs with Stuart Hall, who claims that ‘[w]hat we say is

⁷⁵ See Sewell 20f, Krupat *Red Matters* 23, and Hoy’s introduction to *How Should I Read These?*. Furthermore, Thomas King criticizes that cultural and political restrictions are imposed on indigenous literature. See King *Relations* XV.

⁷⁶ See Fagan 240.

⁷⁷ See Episkenew, “Responsible Criticism”. She argues that there is not only a literary canon but also a “canon of interpretation”, which is mostly carried out by non-Aboriginals who have a pursue certain ideology. For an analysis of criticism and translations of Native literature in North America see Chapter 5 ‘Literary “Criticism”’ in Krupat *Ethnocriticism*.

always “in context”, positioned’ (qtd. in Eigenbrod *Travelling* xv). This means that as a recipient of First Nations literature, be it a critic or a reader, one naturally judges from a distinct perspective due to his or her cultural, social, political and economic background.

Some Native academics have argued that ‘the basic assumptions about the universe and, therefore, the basic reality experienced by tribal peoples and by Western people are not the same’ (Gunn Allen 55). Hence, in their view it is impossible for non-Native critics to review First Nations literature appropriately. As Sherman Alexie poetically puts it,

Just because you dream
does not mean you see into my dreams.

(Alexie, in Hoy *Native Women Writers* 7)

Greg Young-Ing further criticizes that non-Aboriginal academic analysis ‘cannot express Aboriginal cultures and world-views, nor can it express Aboriginal Peoples’ unique internal perspective on contemporary Aboriginal political and cultural issues.’ He believes that it ‘tends to reduce the emotionally, historically and culturally charged issues to dry information laden with legalized and/or academic jargon.’ (“Aboriginal Text” 234). In the opinion of Krupat, the imposition of Western theory on Native perspectives is yet another form of colonization.⁷⁸

This is a very radical view concerning the potential of non-Natives to judge indigenous literature. However, since literature is a ‘property of humankind as a whole’ (King, qtd. in Krupat *Turn* 20), it cannot be possessed, only confined by indigenous writers. From my point of view as a non-Native person, following the arguments of German-speaking critics like Renate Eigenbrod, a German-Canadian who teaches in Winnipeg, or Hartmut Lutz, a German editor and literary critic⁷⁹, I believe that credit has to be given to non-Natives who try to understand and make indigenous literature visible for other non-Native readers, if their studies are done in a non-oppressive and non-biased manner.

⁷⁸ See Krupat *Red Matters* 23.

⁷⁹ Eigenbrod extensively discusses the position of non-Native critics, see *Travelling*. She comes up with the concept of the critic as a migrant, which serves to deconstruct cultural boundaries and to reach a fluidity of reading as a border-crossing movement. See also the preface of Lutz *Challenges*.

One fruitful way to discuss Native literature in connection with Western literary production is by considering it in discourse with each other instead of giving a polarized portrayal. In this regard, James Ruppert calls for a 'mediational discourse' (qtd. in Blaeser 58) as a theoretical position of intervention. According to Krupat, '[s]uch a perspective begins by recognizing the differences [...] and attempting, next, to find some language that might mediate between the two' (*Turn* 21).

Eigenbrod supports this argument by stating that a 'non-dualistic worldview' (*Travelling* 193) is preferable to a portrayal of literatures in dichotomous pairs of Native and non-Native. This means that in order to prevent a biased representation and evaluation of First Nations literature, one has to constantly reevaluate and question his or her own position as a critic and to try to establish a mediational discourse between the different views. In order to be able to do so and to better understand the specific modes of writing of First Nations peoples, it is crucial to learn about the context and the history of First Nations and their literary production. According to Eigenbrod,

an increasing knowledge of cultural context, preferable of the *diverse* cultural context, is expected from Euro-Canadian literary critics. [...] Anyone attempting to understand Indigenous literatures must know about the history of colonization from a Native perspective. (*Travelling* 61)

Furthermore, most indigenous critics believe that for a critical and considerate reflection on First Nations literature, it is necessary to examine it on its own terms. One way to put this into practice is the development of specific genres, which have some similarities with Western categories, but also major differences.

To give an example, Sean Teuton argues that the discussion of indigenous literatures with Western labels of genres is not sufficient. Hence, he establishes the concept of the "Red Power novel" (8) as a contrast to the bildungsroman or Coming-of-Age novel, and points out that there are two major differences between these two concepts. I will come back to his argument in a later chapter when discussing the selected novels.

Also, there has been much criticism about the categorization of First Nations literature as "postcolonial writing"⁸⁰. Although there are some novels that fit into this

⁸⁰ For instance, Helen Hoy takes up Spivak's argument that postcolonial theory has reduced minorities to the function of self-consolidating "Other" for the dominant culture. Hence, the theory itself can become a colonizing master narrative which contains difference. See Hoy, Introduction of *How Should I Read These? Native Women Writers in Canada*. Moreover, in her article "Begin with the Text: Aboriginal Literatures and Postcolonial Theories", Dudek gives a

type of writing⁸¹, the term is not satisfactory to comprise all works of First Nations writers. Therefore, indigenous critics came up with their own terms how to analyze and classify aboriginal works of fiction. One such new type of classification is the term “interfusional literature”, which was defined by Thomas King as a kind of text that ‘blends the oral and the written’ (*Relations* xii).⁸² As I will point out later in the analysis of the novels, the correlation between the oral and written is a major component of Native literature. Another newly developed term by Thomas King is “associational literature”, which refers to the body of literature that has been created by contemporary Native writers, and shares certain characteristics. For instances, these stories generally describe a Native community, avoid conflicts between indigenous and non-Native societies and have a rather flat narrative line. In addition to that, they depict communities rather than individuals and focus on activities of everyday life instead of giving heroic accounts.⁸³

To sum up, one can say that although there is no clear definition of “Native literature”, there are narratives written by indigenous authors that can critically be reviewed as First Nations literature. However, the analysis has to be carried out in a way that it does not reduce the discussion to what is “more” or “less” Native in literature and does not create mere dichotomies between Native and non-Native. Moreover, there are certain terms developed by Native critics, which better serve to analyze indigenous literature. These are all essential principles that have to be taken into consideration when one attempts to critically and considerately reflect on First Nations literature.

good account of the critique by King, Smith and Blaeser concerning the application of postcolonial theories on Native Canadian literature. See also Deepika Bahri, “Once More with Feeling: What is Postcolonialism?”

⁸¹ Thomas King discusses the problems of applying the term “post-colonial” to Native literature. He argues that polemic novels such as *Halfbreed* or *In Search of April Raintree* can be reviewed as postcolonial writings since their main aims are to inform about inequities and suppressions of indigenous peoples in Canadian society, and to destabilized power relationships between colonizers and colonized. Other texts, however, do not fit into this genre. See King “Godzilla” 244.

⁸² “Interfusional literature” is sometimes also referred to as “transitional literature”, which blends oral and written styles. Such a kind of literature is designed to be remembered, repeated, and transmitted from memory. See McKenzie 90.

⁸³ See King “Godzilla” 245f.

2.2.3. “The Politics of Storytelling”

It has been repeatedly argued that First Nations literature is a political attempt to work against prevailing stereotypes. Due to the long process of “Othering” by non-Native writers, indigenous authors feel the ‘need to tell their own story’ (“Aboriginal Text” 238) and thereby to ensure that ‘their voices and stories would no longer be controlled by others’ (McKenzie 45).

As Penny Petrone expresses with utmost accuracy,

The literature of Canada’s native peoples has always been quintessentially political, addressing their persecutions and betrayals and summoning their resources for resistance. The political dimension is an inherent part of their writing because it is an inherent part of their lives. Debasing experiences reflecting the new realities of political and social changes created by changing contact situations – suicide, disintegration of the extended family, and the breach between generations – are real problems in the lives and tragedies of Indians today all across the country. The presentation of these lives in poetry, short fiction, novel, drama, and memoir constitutes a political comment. Native writers tell what they see, what they have experienced or are experiencing. They tell what it is like to live as an Indian in today’s society, increasingly caught between tradition and mainstream culture. Already many are able to deal with the culture clash and their own identity not only with perception but with some detachment and control, moving beyond the worst excesses of emotion and diction that marred much earlier protest writing. (*Native Literature* 182)

Thus, the aim of my analysis of the novels chosen is to point out some intercultural themes as well as qualities and aesthetics that distinguish these works of fiction from other writings. In short, there are specific ways which First Nations writers apply to portray landscapes, the connectedness and relations to the community, and the importance of stories and storytelling, to name but a few.

Furthermore, I will analyze in how far the political aspect of storytelling and the important period of the 1960s and 1970s still have their influences on the novels, although many contemporary literary critics assume that there has been a shift away from political aspects to more creative approaches. I will point out that the themes of Native activism, and in connection with that, the quest for identity of indigenous peoples is still prevalent in all three novels, although their approaches differ greatly: While *Slash* offers an open and realistic account of the Native political activities in the 1960s and 1970s, *Medicine River* and *Monkey Beach* tackle the issues in a much more subtle and insinuating manner and rather focus on the problems that First Nations peoples encounter in everyday life in a modern society today.

Before I will go into detail about how Native activism and the quest for identity are depicted, I will draw a general outline of the novels in which I will point out the styles and structures applied as well as the narrative perspectives and common themes. I will, thereby, follow the chronological sequence of the dates of publication so that the analysis corresponds with the scheme of my survey of the historical background of First Nations literature.

3. General outline of the novels

3.1. “To do it the Indian way” - Jeannette Armstrong’s *Slash* (1985)

Jeannette Armstrong has been a First Nations artist, writer, scholar, environmentalist and spokesperson for Native issues for many years. In her first and highly praised novel, *Slash*, she provides an insight into the controversial period of the Red Power movement during the 1960s and 1970s in North America from a Native point of view. Nevertheless, the author manages to undermine biased histories and prejudiced accounts, ‘constructing a counter-discourse’ (Fee 169) by portraying a multifold and multilayered discourse about the political movements and organizations of this era. In this sense, *Slash* can be regarded as a political literary work; a reexamination of the history of indigenous and white peoples’ relations, which uncovers the dichotomies between the divergent cultures and poses questions about truth-telling and the possibility of expression as well as power and resistance.

Critics have repeatedly argued that due to the accuracy of the historic events – all the occurrences are verifiable through government records – and the realistic manner in which the novel is written, *Slash* is more fact than fiction.⁸⁴ Initially, the novel was written as a curriculum project for a history class, in which the author aimed to produce ‘something that students could connect and relate to other than just a dry history of dates’ (qtd. in Williamson 121). In various interviews, Armstrong states that her quest was to ‘put together a profile of the thinking of the period’ (qtd. in Williamson 122f) and to portray ‘what they dreamed, and what their pain and joy were during that time’ (qtd. in Lutz *Challenges* 14).⁸⁵ Indeed, the novel manages to revive the events that most First Nation peoples experienced during that period.

⁸⁴ Nevertheless, it has to be kept in mind that a novel is a work of fiction and hence has to be treated as a form of art instead of pure historic facts. See Hodne and Hoy 78. Moreover, Armstrong points out in an interview with Anderson that she was creating a ‘fiction voice in terms of a non-fiction reality; projecting that non-fiction reality through fictional characters and events.’ (qtd. in Anderson 53).

⁸⁵ In the course of her research, Armstrong did many interviews with witnesses and AIM activists from both the United States and Canada, which was painful for most of them, she admits. See Lutz *Challenges* 21.

When it comes to the genre of the novel, most critics describe *Slash* as a bildungsroman or Coming-of-Age novel⁸⁶ of Tommy/Slash, a young Okanagan boy, growing up at a reserve and, like a *pícaro*, travelling the world in the quest of his true identity. However, I would argue that it is preferable to regard the text as what Sean Teuton calls a “Red Power novel”. He defines it as a ‘process of decolonization, in which the interaction between the concepts of identity and experience drives a dynamic of political awakening and cultural recovery.’ (8)

In his analysis, Teuton describes two ways in which a Red Power novel differs from a bildungsroman: Firstly, in Red Power novels there is a desire to return home due to the protagonist’s need to reconnect with his or her traditional culture and community,⁸⁷ which happens in a process of reinterpretation and transformation of cultural knowledge. Secondly, instead of an individual journey, the quest is depicted as a collective practice, which means that the protagonist’s individual progress is closely linked to the growth of the Native community.⁸⁸ Hence, a Red Power novel uncovers how Natives can ‘awaken politically, reclaim a history, and build a community’ (Teuton 33), which are all aspects that can be identified in Armstrong’s *Slash*.

Since ‘the inscription of language variants in the text is one of the most exciting tools available to the cross-cultural writer’ (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 116), it is significant to examine the use of English in the novel. Due to the author’s use of a plain, non-prestige dialect, most of the time imitating colloquial speech, critics have come up with the idea that Armstrong’s writing is ‘filtered through her own language’ (Brundage 37); her mother tongue Okanagan. Such a deviation from Standard English, often labeled “Red English” or “Rez English”⁸⁹, is marked by a-grammatical sentence structures and slang, which the following passage illustrates:

“Hey, wanna bet Horseface has on long wool bloomers?” [...] “Shit, how you going to find out?” (*Slash* 1)

⁸⁶ See for instance Eigenbrod *Travelling* 57 and Alba, n.p.

⁸⁷ Teuton labels this a ‘tribal realist approach’. See Teuton 33.

⁸⁸ See Teuton 36f.

⁸⁹ “Rez English” is said to be in-between the indigenous language of the author and the English language, from which indigenized forms of grammar emerge. According to Armstrong, ‘it is an oral form of English, spoken with a Native rhythm and a Native structure, enunciation, and so on’ (qtd. in Isernhagen 171).

According to Armstrong, such a vernacular enables her ‘to construct a sense of movement and rhythm through sound patterns’ similar to her native language’ (‘Land Speaking’ 192), which gives the text a certain quality that distinguishes it from other, Western novels.

Furthermore, *Slash* gives a deep insight into the protagonist’s thoughts and feelings by means of contemplation, which is marked by the use of verbs like ‘wished’, ‘felt’, ‘hoped’, ‘looked’, ‘wondered’, ‘thought’, ‘knew’:

It all sounded so big. The things those people were doing made me feel good inside. I wished that people back home could have been doing things like this. I wished that our Chief was here. [...] I sure hoped that Chief was going to be strong and lead the people towards something like what was going on in the States. (*Slash* 69)

When Tommy reflects that ‘I saw I still had some things to learn’ (*Slash* 84) or ‘I always felt there was something missing’ (*Slash* 128), the novel emerges as a very honest account that replicates the zeitgeist of the era;⁹⁰ sometimes violent and aggressive in tone, at other times depressing and sad.

Hodne and Hoy further note the urgency of the verb ‘hear’ in the novel, which in their opinion implies that the author comments on the practice of hearing as ‘an act beyond listening’. This ‘provides a metafictional commentary on the challenge it offers its readers’ (72), which connotes that Armstrong wants the audience to pay close attention to and learn from what the protagonist is conveying, which indicates a didactic purpose of the novel. Besides this metafictional comment, the author inserts certain pauses and ellipses in the text, which make room for the audience to retreat from the it. Such ‘crucial silences’ (Hodne and Hoy 76) can be seen as moments to reflect on the past, the present as well as the future. As Armstrong points out in *The Native Creative Process*⁹¹, one of the chief principles of the Okanagan people is

to practice silence, to listen and speak only if you know the full meaning of what you say. It is said that you cannot call your words back once they are uttered and so you are responsible for all which results from your words. (90)

⁹⁰ This becomes clear when reading texts by Native activists published in the 1970s, most importantly Waubageshig’s *The Only Good Indian*, an essay collection by indigenous people.

⁹¹ *The Native Creative Process* is a work of art, carried out in collaboration with the Métis artist Douglas Cardinal with photographs by Greg Young-Ing. Together they attempted ‘to capture in words the principles which we both seemed to be trying to articulate in our conversations [...] through the unique “creative process” used by Native people.’ See Armstrong and Cardinal 8.

Therefore, I would argue that *Slash* confirms the valuation of silence stemming from a certain cultural philosophy, and it shows the author's awareness of the significance of listening. Both the act of "hearing/listening" and the act of "silence" translate themselves into certain aesthetics in Native literature.

One further important aesthetic quality of the novel is the application of repetitions; a literary device usually employed in poetry, which marks the author's belief that there is no clear distinction between poetry and fiction.⁹² Armstrong repeats certain words as well as distinct phrases in the novel to stress their importance. For instance, the expression 'to do it the Indian way' appears like a refrain in the novel, and although it remains rather unnoticed in the beginning, the reader eventually realizes that it is the solution to the problem how to approach Native affairs and how to survive in a modern society.

When it comes to the structure of the novel, it can be said that *Slash* is composed of four parts as well as a prologue and an epilogue. The latter serve as a frame for the narrative, both written from the perspective of the protagonist as an adult when he looks back at earlier stages of his life. When Tommy states that 'I look at that child and find him a stranger and yet he is nearer to me, as I am now, than when I became a young man' (*Slash* xiii), one can argue that this is the first indication that the structure of the novel is cyclic rather than linear; in other words, the character development of the protagonist is not a linear progress of maturity but performed in cycles.

As Hodne and Hoy declare, there is usually an 'absence of conflict, crisis, resolution [... and instead] the presence of repetition and circularity' (72) in First Nations literature. As if caught in a cycle, Tommy visits his parents at the reserve several times before being able to settle down for good, and he frequently takes part in demonstrations and meetings. According to Green, 'a certain dramatic irony collects around the discourses of progress. [...] Repeatedly the same people make the same apocalyptic proclamations' (60). In the novel, Tommy critically reflects on this state of stagnation:

⁹² In an interview with Hartwig Isernhagen, Armstrong states that a classification of texts in different genres is a Western construct, which she rejects. Rather, she aims to show her students at the En'owkin Centre 'how our own literatures and our own styles and our own backgrounds can change that structure'. See Armstrong, qtd. in Isernhagen 139.

It was the same way almost everywhere with everybody. I could imagine what it was like back home. Same old ham and eggs, as I had heard somebody up there say. Same old conferences, same old bitch sessions, same old resolutions, same old speeches. Same old problems growing worse and worse, added with a definite backlash towards all activists, even by some Indians themselves. (*Slash* 158)

While Van Styvendale argues that ‘Tommy’s recurring departing from and returning home as well as the repetition of political events is an “acting out” [...] of an intergenerational, intertribal trauma as well as an attempt to move beyond [...] this trauma’ (214), other critics have considered the cyclic structure of the narrative as a literary device to imitate the traditional form of oral narration, often referred to as “storytelling”.⁹³

In a talk with Lutz, Armstrong confirms that she aimed at a cyclic structure in her novel; ‘a circle that has to happen in people, many people’ (Lutz *Challenges* 20), composed of various strands that weave together to a composite picture.⁹⁴ Thus, when analyzing *Slash*, one encounters a ‘spiraling unraveling of *Slash*’s initiation trip’ (Alba, n.p.).

Tommy, who is at the same time protagonist and narrator, tells his experiences during childhood and youth in retrospect, which lets the novel appear as a work of autobiographical fiction. Armstrong, however, states in several interviews that the protagonist is not a single character based on an individual, but he is rather a composite of many different activists to whom she talked in the course of her research.⁹⁵

As Green puts it, ‘his [Tommy’s] individual character development takes a backseat to the developments occurring in the community as a whole’, which marks a ‘conception of identity that emphasizes the complex of relationships that connect the individual to his or her past, heritage, and community’ (53). The importance of

⁹³ The realization of orality in First Nations literature by means of storytelling will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.

⁹⁴ Armstrong calls them ‘threads’ and declares that they all involve different aspects in the novel. See Lutz *Challenges* 23.

⁹⁵ See for instance Lutz *Challenges* 16. As Armstrong states, *Slash* ‘couldn’t be one person’s story because no one person could have experienced all those things.’ See Armstrong qtd. in Williamson 123. Furthermore, in the composition of a character that develops in connection with his community, the novel illustrates the author’s view that ‘there is a real non-separation between themselves [individual Natives] and community’. See Armstrong qtd. in Anderson 59. Hence she believes that even her skills as a Native artist belong to the community. See Brundage 75.

community for the author as a Native person is evident in the following passage: ‘I was important as one person but more important as a part of everything else’ (*Slash* 203).

Being closely connected to a community instead of being merely a single character, Tommy can be regarded as exemplary for many Native men of the Red Power era. However, Armstrong received much criticism by feminist reviewers who regretted that she did not choose to write about a female protagonist.⁹⁶ The author defends her decision that ““with the men there were enough of them that I could generalize and do a composite” and so she ““was able to have [Slash] think at the end the way I want our men to be. I had the power to show them that”” (qtd. in Hodne and Hoy 76). Furthermore, she chose to write about a male activist because ‘the Native male was on the forefront’ (qtd. in Williamson 119) during that time.

Even if Armstrong depicts a male protagonist, the novel also includes feminist elements and clearly puts forward a position that emphasizes the importance of women in society:

The women [...] had to be strictly respected by all. [...] It’s really the women who keep things going smooth. All Indian men know that. We learn early from our mothers and grandmothers that it is women who are the strength of the people. We all know it’s the women, too, who shake up any system if they get riled. (*Slash* 122)

Because of her Native philosophy, the author has a different (and more inclusive) perception of gender than most Western writers, which is revealed in the novel in the following extract:

The women worked with their heads, in ways which guys didn’t, to make things run smooth when things got rough. We worked together though. Nobody worried too much about role hang-ups. People just did what they were best at. (*Slash* 122)

In this context, it is interesting to note that Tommy cannot simply be regarded as a male person, but in fact he neglects stereotypical assumptions about gender and ethnic identities imposed on him. This becomes clear at the end of the novel when his wife Maeg dies and Tommy consequently comes to terms with his feminine side, representing both father and mother for his son Marlon. Armstrong explains Tommy’s character development as follows:

⁹⁶ See for instance Emberley 147. Furthermore, some feminist critics claim that there is an obvious erasure of female presence in the novel, most noticeable through the deaths of the two main female characters, Mardi and Maeg. See Hodne and Hoy 70.

In the end, through his metamorphosis into a personality, this character reconciled himself to his feminine qualities. By “feminine,” I mean the capacity for compassion, love, sensitivity, and understanding that’s required by the soft non-aggressive approach.’ (qtd. in Williamson 124)

In this statement it becomes clear that the protagonist’s journey can be read as a consistent crossing of boundaries and borders: in a geographical, ethnical, cultural and psychological sense. As Jones suggests, ‘his role as interlingual, inter-generational, and cross-cultural interpreter defines Tommy’s character. [...] In doing so, he arbitrates cultural and religious disparities’ (56).

Similar to the protagonist, most characters cannot simply be put into binary categories such as male or female, good or bad. According to Green, ‘[they] do not abide by the restrictions imposed by categories such as occupation, gender, or race.’ (53). For instance, Walter is a white activist who nonetheless stands on the side of the Natives and tries to help them struggle for their goals. In a conversation with Tommy he declares, “‘I am beginning to see the things you people are up against. Your people could show us a lot if only we had the sense to listen. I hope we start to listen before it’s too late’” (*Slash* 177). Again, the importance of “listening” is stressed in this paragraph, which has even more impact on the non-Native reader because a white person utters it.

Moreover, the priest at the reserve cannot be categorized easily because of his complex character traits. While he encourages Tommy to ‘don’t ever change your way’ (*Slash* 20), he is at the same time very influential at the reserve and helps to establish clubs, meetings and discussions to educate the indigenous adolescents and adults in religious matters and Western ways of thinking. Tommy critically reflects on these changes and developments:

Ever since the new priest came, more and more people seemed to go to church and other stuff they wouldn’t do before. [...] Seemed like everybody had a club they could belong to. The new priest had a certain way about him that everybody liked, [...and] nobody liked to criticize him because they liked him too much. (*Slash* 20f)

Furthermore, Tommy’s girlfriend Mardi is an interesting character to examine because, although she is absent for the main part of the book and it is never really clarified what happens to her, she is a central figure in the indigenous political organization and triggers Tommy’s interest in Native activism. However, in her mission to save her own people from assimilation and extinction, she eventually becomes the stereotype of the

Native person who is 'dead, in prison or drunk' (*Slash* 95) and who completely overlooks people who have preserved the old traditions and ways of life.

Like several other novels written by First Nation authors, *Slash* also examines characters who have decided that it is preferable to be white.⁹⁷ The best example to illustrate this is Jimmy, one of Tommy's friends from school. Jimmy is a person who defines people according to the terms of the mainstream society, and from a very young age on he tries to 'pass' as a white person by being "up-to-date" (*Slash* 11) with electronic devices and other goods. His attitude towards Tommy's family as being "just stupid and old-fashioned" (*Slash* 11) clearly indicates the rejection of a traditional way of life and his aim to fit into modern society. Tommy describes him as '[a]n image. He lived the role, too. He stayed in town and lived on [sic] education allowance from the Band. He had sporty slacks and a short, neat haircut' (*Slash* 60). Yet, very little works out the way Jimmy hoped. Although he strives for sameness with the white population, Jimmy is still not treated as an equal person when experiencing racial discrimination at the job market: "As I was saying, I got my diploma, but shit, nobody will hire me. [...] Just because I'm Indian they seem to think automatically I'm incompetent" (*Slash* 180). Jimmy eventually retreats to the reserve to work in "Indian social development" (*Slash* 179), disappointed by the government officials who promised equal treatment and opportunities for everybody.

One has to note that even though Jimmy's choice to imitate the "white image" is understandable at the personal level, it has tremendous consequences for a Native community as a group because it makes it even harder to fight for a common goal.

With *Slash*, Armstrong created a novel that is didactic in purpose, primarily focusing on a Native readership to educate them and point out opportunities they have.⁹⁸ While the author's didactic message just subtly shows through in the main chapters, it is explicitly stated in the epilogue of the novel: 'I decide to tell my story for my son and those like him because I must' (*Slash* 209).

⁹⁷ For instance, in Culleton Mosionier's *In Search of April Raintree* the protagonist uses her lighter skin color to "pass" as a white person and thereby manages to escape a life in poverty. In doing so, however, she rejects her own identity, which leads to despair and later to the separation from her sister Cheryl. Like Tommy, April eventually manages to recognize her true self.

⁹⁸ Many Native writers have claimed that they are primarily "writing home", which means that they first and foremost have an indigenous readership in mind. See Eigenbrod *Travelling* 59.

In an interview with Williamson, Armstrong comments on the intended readership as follows:

So that whatever we make is not produced for mainstreamers, first is literature that's produced to inform and communicate that which is universal *among ourselves* and strengthening and stabilizing our ... our ... I guess you could say, our cultural context within a larger society. (qtd. in Williamson 155)

Such a statement illustrates that the author aims to reinforce 'Native reader's sense that there must be a better way to think about themselves than that presented by the dominant discourse' (Fee 169). In doing so, the author manages to 'open up a space between the negative stereotype of the Indian and the romanticized popular view' (Fee 170). This means that Armstrong disrupts stereotypical dichotomies, and instead of reversing racist statements she creates a space that brings about a new understanding and new prospects for Native peoples. According to Margery Fee, 'Native readers finally find what white Canadians take for granted – a first-person voice that does not implicitly exclude them' (172).

Yet, no matter for whom the novel was initially written, it demands dedication and commitment of both audiences in the continuing project of assuring Native equality and autonomy.

Jeannette Armstrong generated a narrative that tackles the colonial impact that is still noticeable in postcolonial societies today and illustrates how racial prejudices are perpetuated via clichés and prevalent stereotypes. *Slash* imagines a future of survival for Native people and hence provides a new and positive ending to the long period of oppression. Armstrong's aim is

through literature to be able to understand *clearly* the effects, or *better* the effects, that colonialism has had on our people [...] And those things need to be given words. (qtd. in Isernhagen 141, emphasis by Isernhagen)

3.2. “Intimate like a picture” - Thomas King’s *Medicine River* (1989)

As a Canadian citizen who was born in California with a Greek-German and Cherokee background, Thomas King himself is an example of transnational blending and the crossing of ethnic boundaries.⁹⁹ His first novel, *Medicine River*, gives evidence of this fact by depicting the process of reconciliation of Will, a half-blood photographer from Toronto, who moved back to his childhood reserve on the Albertan prairies after his mother’s death.

What is noteworthy about this first-person narrative is not only the themes it tackles (i.e. photography as a way to get a better insight into a community), but first and foremost the style in which it was written. By means of irony and humor¹⁰⁰, King destabilizes long-held assumptions about indigenous people, and he wittily writes about the relationship between Natives and their trying to come to terms with the breach between modern and traditional life-styles as well as the economic and political obstacles of every-day life in Canada. King fictionalizes these socio-historical and political realities in order to access a broader audience. ‘With gentle persuasion and light tone, he slips his serious message into the reader’s consciousness’ (68), Vahia states.

Similar to *Slash*, the novel is at times not grammatical (“‘She say she was bringing everyone?’” *Medicine* 195), and it is by and large composed of simple language and short sentence structures, which imitate ordinary conversations. Furthermore, King frequently applies repetitions in the novel. In an interview with Constance Rooke, King states that he wanted even more repetitions to create ‘a pleasant effect’ by renaming and re-introducing the characters. However, he had to change this ‘feeling of starting over again, [...] like a refrain in a song’ due to his editors, which led to the belief that ‘[the stories] don’t stand as nicely on their own as they did at first’ (Rooke, qtd. in McKenzie 89).

⁹⁹ See New 577.

¹⁰⁰ For an analysis of the use of humor in Thomas King’s novels see Bernd Alan Hirsch “Border Crossings: Thomas King’s Cultural Inversions”, and Jennifer Andrews “Humouring the border at the end of the millennium.”

When it comes to the genre, Andrews and Walton call for a description of the novel as “associational literature”¹⁰¹, a term that Thomas King came up with himself. He defines it as a Native body of literature concerned with

the daily activities and intricacies of Native life and organizing the elements of plot along a rather flat narrative line that ignores the ubiquitous climaxes and resolutions that are so valued in non-Native literature.’ (“Godzilla” 245)

This implies that associational literature deals with Native communities alone rather than in connection with the non-Native population. Furthermore, associational literature ‘leans towards the group rather than the single, isolated character, creating a fiction that de-values heroes and villains in favour of members of a community’ (King “Godzilla” 245f).

In *Medicine River*, there are eighteen chapters with episodes depicting different characters and various events happening on the reserve and in the nearby town, without a real climax. Yet, there is a certain development noticeable in the character traits of the protagonist, which goes along with the major theme of the novel: Will’s resurrection. His process of coming home, meeting old friends, dating a white woman and establishing a career as a photographer is blended with the other events happening on the reserve. They all influence his quest for identity and eventually contribute to his appreciation of Native traditions and values. In that sense, it can be said that the novel conforms to the characteristics of associational literature with a structure that is ‘composite rather than linear’ (Wyile 112).

What is remarkable about the structure is the use of ‘dialectic technique’ (Dvorak 67) or ‘split storyline’ (William 130). Like many other Native novels, *Medicine River* is a ‘doubly-plotted first person narrative [which] alternate[s] regularly between presenting the present and the retrospective action’ (Davey 236). This means that King juxtaposes events with similar themes from different times and locations, ‘thereby reinforcing each other and the theme itself’ (William 131). It is marked by a similar word choice, as the following passage illustrates:

“You and your brother were raised up in Calgary, so maybe you don’t know everyone. Maybe you should greet everyone, so you know the people.”

WE NEVER KNEW many people when we lived in Calgary. (*Medicine* 199)

¹⁰¹ See Andrews and Walton, n.p.

As Marta Dvorak declares, such a dialectic technique ‘fragments then juxtaposes bits of narrative that project the reader back and forth in time and space and from one set of characters to another’ (67). The crosscuts between events in the Native community and Will’s childhood memories move ‘the audience’s gaze away from linear narrative while still framing important associations that link present to past.’ (Christie 54). For instance, the episode when Will takes a family portrait at the reserve is contrasted with Will’s family photograph taken when he was a young boy. Although the two events correspond, there is a clear difference in the description: Will and his brother, ‘scratching and pulling at those pants’ (*Medicine* 204), and the stiff appearance “‘like someone sprayed [them] up and down with starch’” (*Medicine* 206), is compared to the ‘ocean of relations’ (*Medicine* 205) centering around the elders at the reserve.

Dvorak further argues that this ‘dialectic confrontation is actually a process of synthesis, the apparent opposition shifting gradually to identification and unity. [Each incident] transcends race, colour, and class.’ (68). Thus, one can say that by making use of cultural parallels, the narrative illustrates the universal nature of matters like poverty, shame, violence and family relationships. As Brundage confirms, King is ‘dealing with the universality across cultures, the sense of one family, [and the] learning from its different members.’ (42).

In particular, the setting of the novel can be regarded as universal: It is a small town that could be anywhere in the prairies, with prototypical localities and institutions: a bar, a church, a grocery store, a “Woolworth”. According to Gerry William, King’s portrayal of the town ‘shows a dry and ironic sense of humour’ and ‘an odd and unspoken polarization within the community’ (William 117f). This is due to the fact that there is hardly any noteworthy interaction between Natives and non-Natives. On the other hand, William observes that there is a strong sense of community amongst the indigenous population, where ‘everyone seems to know what everyone else does. If there are secrets, then they are well hidden’ (118).

Such a communal life at the reserve and in *Medicine River* is compared to the isolation that Will encounters in Toronto and Calgary. In this sense, King does not simply parallel a traditional and a modern way of life but instead he contrasts the many interrelations at the reserve with the solitude that Will experiences in Toronto:

“James tells me you been living in Toronto. Big city?”
“Pretty good size.”

“I never been to Toronto. Many Indians living there?”

“Some.”

“Many Blackfoot.”

“No,” I said. “Mostly Cree and Ojibway.”

“You like it there in Toronto?”

“It’s okay.”

[...] “So, when you think you’ll be moving back home?” (*Medicine* 89)

In this passage, it becomes clear that the depiction of the setting as well as the various events are written in a very humorous manner, which is why some critics say that the novel is grounded in the tradition of comic realism¹⁰². However, Stuart Christie points out that *Medicine River* manages ‘to slip out of any strictly realist frame’ (62). King confirms this observation by saying that he is ‘not tied into the realistic novel. Traditional Native stories aren’t tied into realism’ (qtd. in Andrews “Trickery” 184), which emphasizes his opinion that First Nations literature is a distinct body of literature that goes beyond the realistic sphere, and his wish to analyze Native literature on its own terms instead of using Western categories and patterns.

Therefore, critics such as Darrell J. Peters and Florence Stratton¹⁰³ describe *Medicine River* as “trickster humor” or “trickster discourse”, mainly due to the fact that Harlen Bigbear, Will’s friend and supporter, can be regarded as a trickster figure. When taking descriptions of a trickster into consideration, who is usually seen as ‘resist[ing] the boundaries of any given species and [...] likely to appear at any time in any image’ (Lincoln 122) with a ‘tendency to be multiform and ambiguous, single or multiple’ (Babcock 163), it becomes clear that Harlen is not a prototypical trickster figure since he is not in-between the human and non-human spheres and does not have the ability to change shapes, as tricksters usually do. Harlen is rather a ‘community fixer’ and a ‘tribal good spirit’ (Lee 461), who likes to mind other people’s business and tries to mend their relationships, since ‘helping was Harlen’s specialty’ (*Medicine* 29) while ‘discretion was not one of Harlen’s many admirable characteristics’ (*Medicine* 173). The following conversation between Louise and Will exemplifies this fact:

“Yes, Will, I am pregnant.” [...]

“I didn’t come here about that.”

“And Harlen didn’t send you.”

¹⁰² See Wylie 108. He states that King is accessible for a non-Native audience due to his use of the Western tradition of comic realism.

¹⁰³ See Peters 68.

“Harlen? No. Just thought I’d come by and say hello. See if you wanted to go out for lunch.”

“The same Harlen who just happens to be parked across the street. Will, Harlen’s already sent over Floyd and Jimmy and Jack Powless.” (*Medicine* 31)

Although Harlen is described as ‘a hell of a dancer’ (*Medicine* 18), he does not appear as the stereotypical figure of the “Noble Indian”, but rather as a human being who makes mistakes and is sometimes hard to handle: He likes to speculate (‘his *probables* were far from *actuals*’, *Medicine* 27), can be ‘as blunt as a brick’ (*Medicine* 129), and Will notes that ‘being Harlen’s friend was hard’ (*Medicine* 11).

Will, on the other hand, is portrayed through the events in his childhood and in Medicine River. According to Aditi Vahia, he ‘was never an outstanding personality’ (72) since he fails in art, in sports, in his career as a photographer in Toronto and in his relationships with women. Nevertheless, he is very sensitive to the needs of others and turns out to be of ‘big help’ (*Medicine* 34). In the course of the novel, Will becomes ‘the recorder, and quite literal image-maker’ (Lee 462) by means of photography.

The other characters in the novel – too many to mention them here in detail – all add to a vivid portrayal of Natives in modern society. King depicts women as particularly strong and independent (i.e. Louise Heavyman, a self-confident businesswoman, and Will’s mother Rose, who raised the two boys by herself), while men like Will’s father and Will’s brother Jimmy are almost exclusively represented through the insertion of letters, and hence appear more passive.

Once more, the characters traits and the many events happening are described with humor, as the following passage illustrates:

“It’s closed for the night, Will.”

“What?”

“Young fellow, friendly enough. Told us to come back tomorrow.” [...]

“Did you tell him we drove all this way just to see the monument?”

“I told him that.”

“Shit!”

“He said he was sorry.”

“Did you tell him [...] we’re Indians!”

“I told him that, too, Will. He said he was sorry.” (*Medicine* 107f)

In this passage, King glibly uses humor to reveal racist attitudes towards Natives. As Atwood states, King’s novels ‘ambush the reader [...] by being funny. Humour [...] can also be a subversive weapon’ (“Knife” 244).

By being bluntly honest and by means of creative twists of narrative (i.e. when reader expectations about Will's and Louise's marriage are not fulfilled), readers are taken in by the story. Thus, I disagree with Peters when he argues that '[r]eaders need only to listen and to take notice' (78). Quite on the contrary, the novel demands the readers to get involved and respond to the narrative, and to work out all the references and implied meanings. According to Hirsch, the novel 'seek[s] our imaginative engagement, [...] compel[s] us to question [its] wisdom and challenge [its] authority' (85), which is especially difficult for non-Native readers. Interestingly enough, King states in an interview,

I don't mind making the readers feel like outsiders because in some ways it's kind of an interesting sensation for them. It may be uncomfortable but it's not something they normally experience. (qtd. in Andrews "Trickery" 181)

Another technique that King applies in his novel is irony. Because there is no clear definition of the term, I will use it according to William's analysis of the novel; namely as 'a reference to the fact that so many situations and comments in the story are understated and opposite dependent upon the characters themselves' (132). To give an example, Harlen's emotional observations are often contrasted to Will's rather dry and down-to-earth remarks. By adopting an ironic tone, King 'foregrounds the derisory nature of the cultural stereotype that congeal us into separated worlds' (Dvorak 68). This means that when King mockingly writes about 'shak[ing] hands like a damn Indian' or 'how an Indian brings home the bacon' (*Medicine* 141), he clearly draws on stereotypes and images about Native people that have been perpetuated for a long time. Without being angry in tone and without directly blaming non-Native readers, King rejects the characteristics attributed to Native peoples and thus 'plays upon and reverses the negative semiotic field of the indigene' (Davidson 193).

One of the clichés about indigenous peoples is the assumption that Natives have a certain belief about photography.¹⁰⁴ King draws on this notion in the following conversation:

¹⁰⁴ One stereotypical assumption is that Native peoples believe that spirits return from the dead through photography. Christie argues that this supposition denies their role as agents. See Christie 53. In this respect, it is interesting to note that King himself is a photographer and even received a grant by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples to take portraits of Native people for an exhibition. See King, qtd. in Andrews "Trickery" 175.

“Susan tells us you’re Native, too,” said Alice. “King of ironic, isn’t it? I mean, being a photographer.”

“What?”

“You know ... the way Indians feel about photographs.” (*Medicine* 219)

What is interesting to note is that King puts forward such a stereotypical supposition by non-Natives but at the same time illustrates that even Native people have clichéd assumptions:

“I’ve been thinking about you wanting to start up a photography business here in Medicine River.”

“Harlen,” I said, “I’m not starting a business in town. You have lots of photographers here already.”

“No Indian photographers, Will. Real embarrassing for us to have to go to a white for something intimate like a picture. Bertha says you got a lot of relatives on the reserve. You think they’d go to a stranger for their photography needs when they can go to family?” (*Medicine* 91)

Furthermore, the photographs that were given to Will after his mother’s death offer stories about the history of the reserve, intra-tribal relations, and the like, both to the narrator and the reader. Thereby, the protagonist becomes ‘a detached and almost impartial observer, [...] a narrator who can withdraw from the scene and become, for all intents, the storyteller who holds an audience spellbound and captive’ (William 122f).

On the other hand, by taking photos of the community, Will develops into a tribal historian and a part of the relations. As Davidson argues, ‘[t]he photographer becomes the photographic subject [...] in order that, ultimately, he can share his/their subjectivity’ (196). The usual dichotomy between photographic subject and object is thus undone. According to Christie, photography in *Medicine River* is not

a tool attending colonialism, nor [...] a compensation for lack of tribal representation within established media such as photography. [...] The novel presents a self-reflexive text in pictures about what pictures can and cannot achieve as frames around, or borders onto, tribal discourses. (53f)

One last significant theme I want to mention here is the absence of a father figure for the protagonist. This is an issue that comes up in almost all of King’s novels, which may have to do with his father not being present during his childhood and youth.¹⁰⁵

Will’s father is introduced to the reader by the insertion of letters, which he wrote to his mother when Will was a young boy and which were given to him after his

¹⁰⁵ See King, qtd. in Andrews “Trickery” 166f.

mother's death. The parent turns out to be a white rodeo rider, who had to become a real-estate agent due to a severe injury and who drowned his sorrows in alcohol instead of taking care of his family. It would be understandable if Will dismissed him, but instead Will makes up stories to compensate for his loss. According to Christie, the protagonist 'neither romanticize[s] nor damn[s] the man's history, [but instead] he takes on a dimension only photographic lens can reproduce.' (58)

Regarding the intertextual references in *Medicine River*, it can be said that they are not as manifold and more indirect than in King's later novel, *Green Grass Running Water*. Nevertheless, the author repeatedly alludes to popular culture and to Canadian icons. To give a few examples, Harlen is compared to 'John Wayne throwing hand grenades' (*Medicine* 18), and Native artists like Joanne Cardinal Schubert and Jane Ash Poitras as well as the author Basil Johnston are mentioned. Moreover, Will's mother works for the Hudson Bay Company ("the Bay"), 'a conventional signifier of Canadian national identity' (Stratton, n.p.), and later for "PetroCanada", 'a symbol of Canadian sovereignty' (Stratton, n.p.).

According to Herb Wyile, '[s]uch intertextual allusiveness and strategic satire highlight the way in which King's work must be approached and appreciated' (121). In other words, 'Medicine River does provide quite explicit instruction on how to read its narrative' (Stratton, n.p.); namely, as a mode of resistance against a continued colonization.

In his novel, King tackles themes like prejudice, violence, integration, acculturation, intermarriage, relationships, the importance of community, and economic difficulties to give a portrait of a "universal" Native community in the Albertan prairies. By doing so, King is one of those First Nations authors who 'are putting forward their own stories, stories of resistment [sic] which acknowledge the inherently syncretic nature of the world while simultaneously fighting clichés and stereotypes' (Peters 78). By way of mixing different modes and genres and not always conforming to the conventions of a realistic account, King establishes an innovative and creative type of First Nations literature. As Wyile asserts,

we also have to recognize in King's writing a highly unique and varied (rather than representative) style that reflects a wide range of influences and forms, and that his writing speaks to non-Native readers as well as Native readers.' (121)

3.3. “Elvis and Sasquatch” - Eden Robinson’s *Monkey Beach* (2000)

What appears to be a Coming-of-Age novel of Lisamarie Hill, a girl growing up in a small Haisla community on the west coast of Canada, is really a plot that progresses on two different levels: On the one hand, *Monkey Beach* presents the “realistic” search of Lisa for her brother Jimmy, who was lost at sea, and on the other hand it depicts the psychological quest for Lisa’s own identity in-between modern society and a spiritual world.

When keeping the many reviews of the highly acclaimed novel in mind, which almost exclusively regard it as a ‘glorious Northern Gothic’ (Thomas D9), a ‘Neo-Gothic’ (Howells 110) or as ‘a contemporary gothic novel in the tradition of Stephen King’ (Cariou 36) with a different cultural environment¹⁰⁶, one could easily accept this term and evaluate the novel according to it. However, when further analyzing the point of view from which the novel is told, namely the perspective of a protagonist caught in-between popular Canadian and traditional Haisla culture, it automatically calls for a reconsideration of the questions whether the novel can be depicted in the conventional framework of the Gothic novel.¹⁰⁷

As a literary term, the Gothic novel is not new in the study of literature, and it can be traced back to early British Gothic novels such as Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story* (1764), or Ann Radcliffe’s *The Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne* (1789). The main characteristics of the Gothic novel are the setting in a mysterious place (typically a deserted or haunted castle or fortress), distinct characters like a passive heroine and a cruel villain, a fragmented plot with unrelated digressions as well as literary devices borrowed from lyric poetry, i.e. the depiction of extreme emotions. The aim of the Gothic novel is said to be the illustration of either ‘a

¹⁰⁶ Almost all reviews and bookstores place the novel in the genre of the Gothic novel. See for instance Warren Cariou, Joan Thomas or Chapters Indigo Online Bookstore. On the other hand, there are critics who do not label it as a specific genre but instead analyze it by means of descriptions, such as a ‘darkly comic narrative’ (Andrews “Beauty” 160), or as ‘at times dark’ (Hunter 68), ‘at times shocking’ (Connally 172).

¹⁰⁷ See Andrews “Rethinking”, n.p. and Castricano 806. Both argue that there are interpretive challenges for the reading of the text as Gothic fiction, because *Monkey Beach* simultaneously invites, opposes, and goes beyond the framework of the genre.

nightmare vision of a modern world' (Kilgour 12) or 'a tempting alternative to the mundaneness of everyday life' (Kilgour 7).¹⁰⁸

Although the mainstream of Canadian fiction seems to belong to social realism, there has been a long tradition of Gothic fiction in Canadian writing.¹⁰⁹ It started with the publishing of *Wacousta; or, The Prophecy: A Tale of the Canadas* (1832) by John Richardson. It is often claimed that Gothic novels have played an important role in Canadian literature because this genre 'allowed early White Canadian writers a means of articulating their own ambivalent relationships to the New World' (Andrews, "Rethinking", n.p.). For instance, Susanna Moodie's *Roughing it in the Bush* was reviewed as 'wilderness gothic' (Howells 106), which emphasizes the feeling of dislocation in a remote location in the newly colonized land. According to Jennifer Andrews, 'the challenges of negotiating the contradictions of the New World and the populations that already occupied the land provide a rich setting for the Canadian Gothic' ("Rethinking", n.p.). Hence, the motif of the wilderness became a common feature in Canadian Gothic fiction, although it was refigured over time when more domestic elements were added.¹¹⁰ Moreover, it is argued that Canadian Gothic fiction has certain qualities and distinctive characteristics, which is due to the 'colonial history, its traditions of regional difference, and its ethnically and racially diverse postcolonial present' (Howells 112).¹¹¹

Although *Monkey Beach* is seen as part of the 'neo-Gothic revival' in the mid-1990s (Howells 107) and 'adheres in many respects to the formal and thematic conventions of the Gothic novel' (Andrews "Rethinking", n.p.), the novel simultaneously dismantles its conventions and triggers a rethinking of the significance of the Gothic novel in Canada, and especially in First Nations literature. Jodey

¹⁰⁸ See Kilgour 3-15.

¹⁰⁹ See Atwood "Monsters" 230. As a gothic writer herself, she analyzes the use of "monsters" in Canadian fiction, because she believes that 'the ordinary life on middle-earth' (230) is not the true picture of the nation and its literature and that there is 'indeed "a mass of dark intimations" in the Canadian literary soul' (252).

¹¹⁰ For a concise analysis of Canadian Gothic fiction see the article "Canadian Gothic" by Coral Ann Howells. She names Alice Munro and Margaret Atwood as the key figures and analyzes elements that can be regarded as distinctive features of Canadian Gothic fiction. Furthermore, Arnold Davidson gives an account of features of the Canadian Gothic in his article "Canadian Gothic and Anne Hébert's *Kamouraska*."

¹¹¹ Howells argues that there is a distinct feature called the 'Canadian trope of unhomeliness' with the depiction of sublime landscapes and wild nature. Hence, the 'wilderness gothic', although transformed and refigured, is still relevant in contemporary literature. See Howells 113.

Castricano's analysis surveys this aspect in detail, in which she demonstrates that although the novel 'deals *in* the Gothic, it could be said that the novel, paradoxically, stages a resistance *to* a totalizing view of the Gothic' (808, emphasis by Castricano).

To exemplify this contention, the character of Lisa is not an archetypal protagonist of Gothic fiction, since she is neither a passive hero nor a tyrannical villain, and because she can connect to the spiritual world and predict death. This "gift" (*Monkey* 294) enables her to communicate with her dead ancestors, through whom she learns about her past and her future, but it is at the same time dangerous, as Ma-ma-oo explains, "“Unless you know how to use it, it will kill you”" (*Monkey* 371). Trapped in her seeking to find out what is right or wrong, she lies to her parents about her ability to contact dead people and about her dreams that foreshadow future events, which tears the family further apart. Lisa's decision is understandable, however, when considering her mom's reaction to her honest confession: "“Clearly a sign, Lisa, [...] that you need Prozac”" (*Monkey* 3).

Moreover, her problems to negotiate two very different approaches to life – traditional (spiritual) knowledge and the Western influence of popular culture – let her appear as an ambiguous character who is at times insecure, at times frightening and "monstrous". Due to her coarse and aggressive behavior in school and in dealing with other people she earns the nickname "monster" from her favorite uncle Mick, a political activist: "“You are an evil little monster [...], you are my favourite monster in the whole wide world”" (*Monkey* 67). Only later does she find out that it was his nickname as a young boy, which illustrates their close relationship and their similar personality. While Andrews suggests that the recognition of herself as 'monstrous' ("Rethinking", n.p.) links Lisa to her Haisla culture, Rob Appleford emphasizes that she still remains an outsider of her culture. By admitting that she forgets things about certain traditions, she acknowledges the loss of her cultural background and 'calls into question her own reliability as a "Native informant"' (Appleford 92).

Furthermore, Lisa is not a passive character in contact with the mythical world. This becomes clear in the episode when Lisa stops at Monkey Beach and turns the hierarchy between the "things" in the forest (mysterious creatures in the woods which have haunted her since her childhood and finally demand her blood) and herself upside-down. It is Lisa who stands up to them and commands the creatures to give details about Jimmy's death: "“You tell me where Jimmy is first”" (*Monkey* 369). However, this strenuous encounter exhausts her almost to death.

As a consequence of such an unusually strong and determined protagonist, ‘familiar Gothic motifs are defamiliarised and recontextualised’ (Howells 112) in Robinson’s novel presenting reasonable and supernatural events. According to Castricano, ‘[i]t is this Western psychological model of the ‘delusional’ or ‘immature’ mind that comes undone when Lisa reads against the grain to understand things differently.’ (809). This becomes obvious when Lisa explains to the reader in various lessons about “contacting the dead” how ‘[s]eeing ghosts is a trick of concentration’ (*Monkey* 212), and ‘[t]o contact the spirit world, you must control the way you enter this state of being that is somewhere between waking and sleeping’ (*Monkey* 139). She even gives exact instructions to directly involve the readers and maybe even motivate them to imitate her: ‘Lie down. Wear loose clothing. Don’t play any music. [...] Be still. Close your eyes. [...] Begin by becoming aware of your breathing [...]’ (*Monkey* 212).

It is often said that *Monkey Beach* is a realistic account of Haisla traditions and knowledge, which again is a simplifying act by many (non-Native) critics. Although the intertwined stories and descriptions of traditional cooking methods and ceremonies to contact spirits are depicted in a very detailed and almost technical manner, the novel still has to be regarded as a work of fiction.

Other events in the novel that appear highly realistic are the almost scientific descriptions and detailed accounts of biological processes of the body, i.e. the cardiovascular system, which appear as a side plot and emphasize Lisa’s interest in science. This obsession with scientific explanation, triggered by her grandmother’s heart attack, stands in opposition to the mythic elements of the novel and can hence be regarded as a means to construct a dichotomy between two different approaches to explaining the world, and Lisa’s concern with both. Influenced by her Western education, she uses her knowledge to try to remove herself from unpleasant situations: “I try to concentrate on other things. Technical terms I learned in biology’ (*Monkey* 164). Interestingly, these installments are also directly communicated to the reader by the application of instructions, although these are not meant to be taken seriously: ‘Pull your heart out of your chest. Cut away the tubes that sprout from the top. Place your heart on a table [...]’ (*Monkey* 191).

What is noteworthy about the novel is what Coral Ann Howells calls ‘parallel spatial and temporal realities’ (112), which means that there are corresponding time frames of past and present, and two different settings in the spiritual and the real world.

Concerning the level of time, this refers to the fact that stories and events of Lisa’s childhood, triggered by the traumatic disappearance of her brother, are revealed in flashbacks, which amounts to the utilization of two different tenses: The quest for Jimmy is told in present tense while childhood memories and other stories are narrated in past tense. Hence, the novel cannot simply be regarded as a linear Coming-of-Age novel, but similar to my argument in the analysis of *Slash*, it is more suitable to evaluate it according to terms by Native scholars, as “Resistance literature” (LaRocque, qtd. in Andrews “Rethinking”, n.p.) or as a “Red Power novel” (Teuton).

At other times, the literary device of foreshadowing is applied to get an insight in Lisa’s dreams and ideas about the explanation of Jimmy’s mythical disappearance. Lisa knows more than she admits and reveals her understanding layer by layer: ‘Did I know of anything else that could be helpful? No, I said. It wasn’t really a lie. What I knew wouldn’t be particularly useful now’ (*Monkey* 6). This emphasizes the authority of the protagonist to hold certain events back and hence the limited viewpoint of a first-person narration.

Concerning the spatial level, the novel also moves on two levels: There are accounts of everyday life in Western Canada as well as episodes that take place in the spiritual world. To give an example of the latter:

It came then, a light touch on my shoulder. No one was near me. Out on the water, a dark head bobbed. [...] For a moment, it looked like a baby in a christening outfit. But when I was a few feet from it, it was just a bucket. [...] Something caught my ankle then and yanked me under. (*Monkey* 356f)

This passage illustrates how Lisa is drawn into and falls for the world of spirits. The two spatial levels can even take place simultaneously: Being in utmost despair about a life with no future perspective, Lisa encounters a ghost version of her cousin Tab on the streets of East Vancouver, who commands her to “[g]et your act together and go home” (*Monkey* 301).

Considering the setting, a significant portion of the novel details the portrayal of the landscape of the shore of British Columbia. The exact location of the village in which Lisa and her extended family live is introduced in the first of the four parts of the

novel, labeled “Love Like the Ocean”. Instead of describing the location of the Haisla territory and its inaccessibility, the narrator guides the readership over an imagined map of Western Canada in a process of mapping the exact site, which is carried out with utmost precision. There are conflicting views concerning the significance of this form of narration: According to Andrews, the process of precise mapping stands in opposition to the mysterious disappearance of Jimmy.¹¹² Appleford contests this view by arguing that the depiction of the location and Jimmy’s vanishing are both mysterious and inaccurate. He further declares that they mirror ‘Lisamarie’s desire to “map” her world and thereby stave off the recognition that such an act, as an assertion of mastery, is always misleading’ (96).

As the title suggests, one of the most significant settings in the novel is Monkey Beach, a shore at the coast of British Columbia. This is unusual insofar as southern Ontario is said to be the typical location for modern Canadian Gothic novels.¹¹³ Situating the novel in an abnormal yet mysterious setting can be regarded as a strategic device of the author, which allows her to move beyond the area of a “typical” Gothic novel and give it a “Native twist”.

Monkey Beach is portrayed as a particularly mysterious setting; an enclosed shore remote from the rest of the world: ‘The trees were thick, and beneath them everything was hushed. A raven croaked somewhere above. [...] I could hear myself breathing. I could feel someone watch me’ (*Monkey* 15f).

Lisa encounters strange creatures on Monkey Beach, which inhabit this piece of land, but whose existence remains unclear. The so-called b’gwus or sasquatch¹¹⁴ is referred to as ‘the wild man of the woods’ (*Monkey* 317) and depicted as ‘not quite human, not quite wolf, but something in between’ (*Monkey* 374). The narrator describes them on three different levels: as a scientific object, a touristy image and a creature that simply exists. She knows that there is worldwide interest in research about Bigfoot, Yeti, Snowman or Sasquatch, terms that are used to refer to similar huge human-shaped figures spotted in remote areas by tourists or researchers. Moreover, the narrator brings

¹¹² See Andrews “Rethinking”, n.p.

¹¹³ See Andrews “Rethinking”, n.p.

¹¹⁴ For an outline of the origin of the term b’gwus and the different mythologies about the sasquatch, see the article by Rob Appleford.

in the perspective of tourist agencies who use the attraction of such an image, 'the equivalent of the Loch Ness monster' (*Monkey* 317), to make money through tabloids, beer advertisements or websites. Nevertheless, Lisa does not question its existence since she believes in the spiritual world, and it seems that she even tries to persuade the reader of her opinion: '[...] if your skin tightens into goose bumps, your instincts are warning you that he is still around' (*Monkey* 318).

According to Atwood, 'the North, the Wilderness, has traditionally been used in Canadian literature as a symbol for the world of the unexplored, the unconscious, the romantic, the mysterious and the magical' ("Monsters" 232). Monsters, on the other hand, were often depicted as the "Other", as forces outside and opposed to the human protagonist.¹¹⁵ In *Monkey Beach*, however, this is not the case. Although it is never fully revealed and remains ambiguous, there is a certain relationship of the protagonist and the b'gwus in the forest not only due to her nickname "monster" but also due to the fact that she is the only one who actually encounters them, which can be traced back to her 'role as shaman' (Castricano 811). Moreover, as it turns out in the end, the spiritual world can also provide a refuge and a place for relief as Lisa learns that the magic world can be consoling. She reflects that 'I felt deeply comforted knowing that magical things were still living in the world' (*Monkey* 315f). In an interview with Suzanne Methot, Robinson confesses her opinion about the spiritual sphere: 'she worries more about reaction from the spirit world than she does about earthly punishment for cultural transgressions. Her spirit guardians like to tell her off' (Methot, n.p.).

The very detailed portrayal of nature as romantic and at the same time unpredictable, which springs from a culture-specific background, stands in firm opposition to the additional urban setting of the novel, when Lisa moves to Vancouver and gets involved in partying, drugs and alcohol. She later reflects that '[s]ome of it was fun' (*Monkey* 296), but she also tells that it was a destructive period of her life as a young adult, as the 'Queen bee', when 'friendship [happened] on my terms, with me pulling the strings, in control as long as I gave honey' (*Monkey* 302). She learns that friendship with her 'party pals' was not meant to last: 'Without a party, we went our separate ways' (*Monkey* 297).

¹¹⁵ See Atwood "Monsters" 233. She exemplifies her argument with a brief analysis of William Blake's *Brown Waters and Other Sketches*.

What Robinson accomplishes is to turn stereotypical assumptions about the Gothic genre as well as the position of Native people in modern society upside down. In her account, the external world becomes at times destructive, while the gothic setting is not necessarily a vicious force. Instead, she depicts a distinct world where monsters and ghosts exist, and portrays spirits as guides. In doing so, Robinson questions the materialist Western approaches that deny superstition.

There are many different critical opinions about the novel, but one view seems to be consistent: It is written in a realistic and truthful manner. This is best illustrated by a reviewer in the *Washington Post*, who claims that *Monkey Beach* ‘contains some of the truest passages I have read on what it is like to be a teenager [...], perceptive and unflinching’ (qtd. in “Eden Robinson. New Face of Fiction 2000”).

Such a straightforward account of a teenage girl and later a young adult is conveyed through personal dialogues, the insights into her feelings and the many sensual descriptions, which grasp the mood of nature and humans in it:

The ocean looks black where there’s no light and dark green where the sun hits. A wave of lovely dizziness hits as the buzz kicks in. I have a moment of dislocation. I can separate myself from my memories and just be here, watching the clouds, ocean and light. I can feel my own nausea, the headache I’m getting, the tightness in my chest. (*Monkey* 18)

On the other hand, the novel consists of vernacular swear words, and uses rather short sentence structures, which again could be mistakenly criticized as simple and undemanding. However, a plain style is used in *Monkey Beach* as a literary device to illustrate character traits or to stress Lisa’s exhaustion and her inability to focus by omitting certain words: ‘Crawl through the bushes. Rocks hard on my palm. [...] Can hear it, pacing me. Eyelids so heavy’ (*Monkey* 370). Furthermore, Robinson declares that she ‘has never been comfortable with adjectives and adverbs’ (Hunter 68), which implies that characters unfold through dialogue rather than through detailed descriptions.

Like *Slash*, there are pauses and ellipses for the reader to become aware of the many political and cultural implications. Moreover, the novel is comparable to *Medicine River* insofar as it also makes use of irony and humor (i.e. when uncle Mick searches for the “underdog” of all Christmas trees) to bring about relief and alleviation in ‘[h]er version of “postindian” parody’ (Sugars 82).

Summing up, one can say that *Monkey Beach* tackles many themes that are important in First Nations literature: hybridity, racism, violence, family relationships and the quest for the self. These are entangled in a tale that represents more than one genre and merges realistic and supernatural accounts and settings. Robinson does not simply explain Native culture as a concept; instead, she presents private and delicate dialogues of people with a Haisla/Heiltsuk cultural background that are often filled with irony, ellipses, and questions that are not or cannot be answered. According to Kilgour,

[t]he very name ‘gothic novel’ [...] is an oxymoron that reflects its desire to identify conflicting impulses: both towards newness, novelty, originality, and towards a return to nature and revival of the past. (17f)

In this regard, *Monkey Beach* can be read as a mystery story in which the protagonist ‘discovers skeleton after skeleton in the family closet’ (Appleford 91). The text is a Gothic novel insofar as it deals with Lisa’s complicated task to balance her desire to be “normal” with her relation to traditions and spirits.

4. “Seeking a Third Choice” – Native Activism in First Nations Literature

4.1. Writing as a Political Act

It is often said that aboriginal people as a minority group cannot control how their identity is defined, but instead are characterized through the discourse of others.¹¹⁶ In the case of the First Nations peoples of Canada, it was and still is the discourse of the predominant, white society that perpetuates certain images of indigenous peoples.¹¹⁷

Images about indigenous peoples usually derive from film and other media, and are mostly associated with nature, sexuality, violence, orality, mysticism and the prehistoric. Edward Said labels them ‘standard commodities’ (qtd. in Goldie 15), which are said to be ‘part of a circular economy within and without the semiotic field of the indigene’ (Goldie 17). This means that in Western thinking, the image of the Native person has been strongly linked to originality and authenticity as well as the idea that Natives are closely connected to nature and to the past.¹¹⁸ Such a kind of representation tries to keep the impression of the indigene as ‘innocent, childlike, unsophisticated’ (Goldie 131) alive, which was constructed during the time of colonization and had strong political objectives. According to Daniel Francis, ‘Europeans have tended to imagine the Indian rather than to know Native people, thereby to project onto Native people all the fears and hopes they have for the New World’ (8).

Furthermore, it has been repeatedly argued that the interest in indigenous peoples by non-Natives and the concentration on images that characterize them is in fact self-interest. In other words, the mainstream society is ‘using First Nations people to measure itself, to define who it is or is not’ (Crosby 271). Terry Goldie confirms this statement when he argues that the ‘other is of interest only to the extent that it

¹¹⁶ See for instance Valaskakis 212.

¹¹⁷ For a concise analysis of the image of Native people in Canada see *The Imaginary Indian: The Image of the Indian in Canadian Culture* (1992) by Daniel Francis, a Euro-Canadian historian who uses the words “Indians” and “Imaginary Indian” to discuss the images that are used to represent the indigenous population of North America, and to define the “self” (mainstream society) against the “other”. In short, he sees the image of the Indian as “a White invention” (Francis 5), which is rooted in the colonial past and continues to be influential in modern society.

¹¹⁸ See for instance Murray 83f or Goldie 14; 17.

comments on the self" (11). As a consequence, the images of "self" and "other" are constructed as binaries; as polar opposites where the "other" represents everything that the "self" is not or tries not to be. Sander Gilman calls this an 'imaginary line' and describes it as follows:

Because there is no real line between self and the Other, an imaginary line must be drawn; and so that the illusion of an absolute difference between self and Other is never troubled, this line is as dynamic in its ability to alter itself as is the self. This can be observed in the shifting relationship of antithetical stereotypes that parallel the existence of 'bad' and 'good' representations of self and Other. But the line between 'good' and 'bad' responds to stresses occurring within the psyche. Thus paradigm shifts in our mental representations of the world can and do occur. We can move from fearing to glorifying the Other. We can move from loving to hating. (qtd. in Goldie 11)

Keeping this notion of shifting paradigms of people's imagination in mind, it is understandable that there are two opposing stereotypical ascriptions to First Nation peoples: the cliché of the Native as a "wild savage" and the counter-cliché as "nature's nobleman."¹¹⁹ In other words, 'the "Indian" voices most popular [...] are often those of would-be Indians, who reinscribe nineteenth-century, romantic images of 'noble savages"' (Shanley 28). Yet, the image of the "nobleman" was soon turned into 'the ignoble savage, the wicked, bloodthirsty redskin of so many history books and cheap novels' (Francis 221).

This means that like US literature, 'Canadian literature is replete with stereotypical Native figures who often serve to reinforce negative attitudes about Native peoples' (Anderson 49). But what is most appalling is that these inscriptions have had a great impact on Native peoples' lives because they have tremendously influenced policies and political attitudes towards them. To put it differently, there is a 'clear distinction between what is real [...] and what is represented' (Murray 80); nevertheless, these false images in popular culture are 'determining the quality of the lived experience of American Indians' (Shanley 29).

As a consequence, Native people do not only begin to incorporate the racist images into their own belief systems, but the mainstream society also sets a standard for them; a normative stance of who an Indian is or has to be. Hence, images 'as either *too Indian or not Indian enough*' (Dumont 47) have come about,¹²⁰ which can bring about

¹¹⁹ See also Young-Ing "Aboriginal Text" 233, Davidson 147, Karrer and Lutz 19, Francis 221.

¹²⁰ In her essay "Positive Images of Nativeness", Dumont raises some questions about the representation of Native people in literature and art. She comments on the fact that the 'colonial

hopelessness and despair for Native peoples who try to fit into traditional as well as modern society.

Furthermore, it has to be noted that images about indigenous peoples are not only perpetuated by non-Native literature, film and media, but there is also the imagery by Native peoples themselves which has been incorporated into the concept of Canada as a nation via an 'appropriation by White society of so many aspects of Native culture' (Francis 223). According to Marcia Crosby,

native imagery and art is already deeply entrenched in the public arena and in institutional collections, as a symbol for a national heritage, a signifier for Canadian roots, a container for the Canadian imagination and a metaphor for the abstract ideals of Western ideology.' (287)

All these factors suggest that indigenous people cannot define their own identity but instead are represented by mainstream society. Hence, Native people feel the need 'to "tell their own story" [...] because of the way in which they have been misrepresented' (Young-Ing "Aboriginal Text" 235f).

In order to work against those often racist and very reductionist images, First Nations authors have come up with works of fiction and poetry that depict indigenous people from their own, culturally informed point of view. As Jeannette Armstrong declares in an interview,

our people have been stereotyped, misunderstood and misrepresented in many ways. This has been damaging and exploitative. People need to tell their own stories, whatever culture they're from in order to relate to one another in a more truthful sense. (qtd. in Williamson 126)

As King addresses the non-Native audience, 'written literature has allowed us to come to you' (King "Godzilla" 114). Hence, the act of writing is regarded as 'a particularly powerful cultural tool [...] and] a significant agent of culture, particularly as it sorts out what pieces of life will be selected to be remembered' (Armstrong "Life-writing" 34). This means that First Nations literature generates more realistic images of Native people because those writers re-create facets of their cultural background that have been misrepresented. As Janice Acoose declares, 'contemporary Indigenous writers are

images' are gradually incorporated into their own belief system. Furthermore, Dumont believes that it is time that the image of the urban Native person, who is becoming the majority, has to be absorbed into people's minds, and she raises the crucial question, 'Why do popular images of us lag behind our reality?' See Dumont 48.

writing their cultures back into stability and thereby assuring survival' (39). At the same time, they compel non-Native readers to reconsider their former beliefs.¹²¹

In an article, Armstrong states that she pursues the 'quest for empowerment of my people through writing', and she believes that 'healing can take place through cultural affirmation.' According to the author, it is the duty of all indigenous writers to 'examine the past and culturally affirm toward a new vision for all our people in the future' ("Disempowerment" 209f). Maria Campbell is in line with this statement when she describes the responsibility of Native writers as follows:

Our new storytellers have a big job. They must understand their sacred place and they must also understand the new language and use it to express their stories without losing the thoughts and images that are culturally unique to them. This new storyteller must also be a translator of the old way, so that it will not be lost to a new generation. And all this must be done on paper, for that is the new way. (Campbell, qtd. in Wheeler 204f)

To sum up, I would argue that the texts of these "new storytellers" are political in two ways: Firstly, they constitute an act of resistance against perpetuated stereotypes and against non-Native authors who try to write for them. In other words, those authors create literature as a form of activism in itself. Secondly, First Nations literature deals with political issues, which reflects the fact that politics is still very relevant for indigenous peoples since it determines their economic, political and social well-being. As Peters rightly states, First Nations literature is a 'politically charged discourse' (68).

4.2. The Portrayal of Native Activism in the Selected Novels

As mentioned earlier, all three novels deal with political aspects that influence and determine the lives of Native peoples, be it legal policies or personal encounters with people who have prejudices against them. First and foremost, the novels tackle the issue of racism both on the individual and the institutional level. According to Armstrong, '[r]acism might be seen as a form of cultural rigidity, characterized by a cultural

¹²¹ See Acoose 29-39. In her article "Post Halfbreed. Indigenous Writers as Authors of Their Own Realities", Acoose discusses the opportunity for Native authors to write as an act of empowerment and resistance. To exemplify this, Armstrong incorporates a statement in *Slash*, when Tommy talks about how it is easier to oppress people 'if you had an image of them from childhood that said, "Those savages deserve it."' (*Slash* 92).

blindness to all its own processes' ("Racism" 78). Furthermore, she claims that these '[c]ontinued attempts to force acceptance of principles which are culturally reprehensible results in psychological oppression and an internalized spiritual disintegration' ("Racism" 80).

Racism is a theme that has often been dealt with by authors of minority groups. The writers mentioned here, however, manage to set themselves apart from the common discourse by depicting racism not simply as unidirectional but instead as a compound and multifaceted system of oppression.

To give an example, the protagonist of *Monkey Beach* is attacked by a gang of racist white men who call Lisa "a feisty little squaw" and try to rape her. Furthermore, the novel depicts episodes in which Native people and their culture are degraded to a mere tourist attraction, i.e. when 'the tourists get their pictures taken by the totem pole' (*Monkey* 321). On the other hand, Lisa is intoxicated and raped by one of her best Native friends, Cheese, who feels rejected and jealous of her relationship with Frank (*Monkey* 256). This illustrates the fact that Robinson depicts '[e]vil behaviour of both the oppressor and the oppressed' (Andrews "Rethinking" 12), which means that Natives are not only portrayed as innocent victims but also as subjects of appalling actions.

In King's novel *Medicine River*, the Native community is very much enclosed so that there is not much contact with the non-Native population. The only real connection Will has with white people is his girlfriend Susan, who introduces him to a world of 'sprouts on the salad', 'Japanese food' and 'art' (*Medicine* 104f). What is interesting to note is the fact that his encounters with Susan are always in connection with the nearby nuclear power plant in Pickering (*Medicine* 215, 224), which can be regarded as a comment on white people's destruction of former Native land. According to Florence Stratton, Will's relationship with a white woman reflects a form of '[m]ental colonization, [...] representing his assimilation to the dominant culture' (n.p.).

Moreover, King tackles the issue of racism in a way that he reverses the reader's expectations and turns "white" racism upside-down. This happens in an episode during Will's childhood, when Native children put up an "Indians Only"-sign to exclude whites from their playing area (*Medicine* 42). It is clearly a mockery of the "Whites Only"-policy at the beginning of the 20th century, when Native people were excluded from

public areas and job opportunities because they were regarded as people with minor status.

Will then remembers another event in his childhood when one of the non-Native neighbors in Calgary, Mrs. Oswald, is beaten up by her husband (*Medicine* 44). King, however, manages to undermine a subjective account of domestic violence by implementing a 'split storyline' (William 130) in which the physical attacks are contrasted with the marital abuse that January, a Native person at the reserve, experiences. These two different strands of narration are interwoven and combined in a way that violence is depicted as part of both societies, which questions the assertion that Natives are peaceful by nature and hence undermines the stereotypical image of the "Native nobleman".

Nevertheless, Stratton sees in the episode with Mrs. Oswald an 'allegory of colonial power and anti-colonial resistance, [which] offers a symbolic representation of the history of colonial relations between the dominant anglo-European [sic] Canadian culture and First Nations peoples' (n.p.). This is due to the fact that the character is 'visibly marked by the language and rituals of Canadian colonialism in its historical encounters with First Nations peoples' (Stratton, n.p.). For instance, Mrs. Oswald shakes hands with and offers sweets to the Native children, and she states that "no matter what your colour, all of us here are Canadians" (*Medicine* 42). According to Stratton, this alludes to the Treaty Commissioner of the *Indian Act*, who tried to persuade the Native population of the benevolence of the policy by distributing symbolic handshakes and treats.

Another incident in which King refers to the impact of colonization and tackles institutional racism is when Will learns that he and his family cannot go back to the reserve due to his parents' marriage, not even after his father's death. Thus, Will's mother Rose becomes 'an outcast after marrying a non-Native person' (Vahia 72), and any attempt to regain her status as a Native woman is illegal. At a young age, Will simply has to accept the fact that he has become 'non-status' and is therefore 'not Indian any more' (*Medicine* 8). As one of his friends frankly explains to him, 'you can't stay. It's the law' (*Medicine* 9). Legal restrictions also affect him years later, when Will is not granted a loan for opening up a photography studio from the Department of Indian Affairs because the office 'couldn't make loans to non-status Indians' (*Medicine* 95).

Similar to King, Robinson tackles the issue of legal discrimination of Native people in her novel *Monkey Beach*. This becomes clear when Lisa's grandfather Ba-ba-oo is injured in World War II and neither finds an occupation nor gets financial compensation because both the Department of Indian Affairs and the Department of Veterans Affairs claim not to be responsible for him:

Veterans Affairs [...] said Indian Affairs was taking care of him. Indian Affairs said if he wanted the same benefits as a white vet, he should move off reserve and give up his status. (*Monkey* 81)

As a result, Lisa's grandfather starts feeling useless, eventually becomes an alcoholic and turns violent towards his family. As Lisa learns from her cousin Tab, "Ba-ba-oo was an asshole. He beat Gran. Instead of sending him away, she sent Mick and Mom [Trudy] to residential school" (*Monkey* 59). This naturally creates a gap in the family, and their relations are then shaped by both the patriarchal violence and the physical abuse encountered in the residential school.¹²² According to Shelley Kulperger, 'Trudy's bitterness and resentment at losing her mother [...] and surviving sexual abuse in the residential school leaves [sic] irreconcilable distances and painful fractures between mother and daughter' (234). Therefore, Trudy becomes violent towards her own daughter, Tab, and verbally insults everybody around her: "Be a fucking little lady. See what that gets you" (*Monkey* 57).

Furthermore, the reader discovers the suppression and abuse of Native people through another side character in the novel, when Lisa finds out that Mick's girlfriend Cookie got kicked out of three residential schools because a nun wanted her to behave 'like a lady' (*Monkey* 145). Cookie reacted in a dismissive manner, yelling "You honkies want women to be like cookies, all sweet and dainty and easy to eat. But I'm fry bread, you bitch, and I'm proud of it" (*Monkey* 145). This exclamation clearly marks the opposition between "white" and Native by the metaphorical use of food (cookies vs. Indian fry bread) as a means of distinguishing the two different cultures.

While Trudy also becomes an alcoholic and an aggressor towards her family, Lisa's uncle Mick tries to deal with the traumatic events by becoming politically active and joining the AIM. Nevertheless, he is still haunted by nightmares about the torture and abuse he experienced:

¹²² See Kulperger 234. She states that both the patriarchal institutions with the domestic violence and the state violence intertwine in a way that makes Native women particularly vulnerable.

“Cookie.” I recognized Mick’s voice. The wash of relief made me giggle. Mick was having a bad dream about cookies. He was moving around, thrashing. [...] Mom’s footsteps creaked across the floor, and I heard her waking Mick up. Someone started to sob, deep, achy sounds that couldn’t be Mick because nothing made him cry. [...]

I woke to the sound of of [sic] rain against the roof, and Mick yelling. [...]

“He’s gone crazy,” Uncle Geordie said.

“Crazy? I’m crazy? You look at your precious church. You look at what they did. You never went to residential school. You can’t tell me what I fucking went through and what I didn’t.

“I wasn’t telling you anything!” Aunt Edith said. “I was saying grace!”

“You don’t get it. You really don’t get it. You’re buying into a religion that thought the best way to make us white was to fucking torture children –”

(*Monkey* 108ff)

Once again, this passage mirrors Native people’s attitude towards the “benevolent” residential school system; namely that it was really a means to distance indigenous children from their cultural heritage and thus to ease the process of assimilation into Christian mainstream society.

What also becomes obvious in *Monkey Beach* is the fact that the collective trauma still has an influence on Lisa and Jimmy, who have internalized the painful events from the past because these have been passed on by their ancestors. As Cariou puts it,

[t]he cultural trauma of the residential school experience seeps down through the generations and across the community to such an extent that Jimmy is personally affected by it, even though neither he nor his parents attended the school. (37)

Similar to their ancestors, who were traumatized by the legacy of European colonization, Lisa and Jimmy are haunted by the emotional trauma that their relatives had to live through. For instance, Jimmy realizes that the ‘stories I read in English had anything [sic] to do with my life’ (*Monkey* 166), which constitutes one problem of “white” education for many Natives who feel that there is not much connection between the education they receive and their own cultural backgrounds.

According to Castricano, modern Gothic fiction reveals unspeakable crimes or painful historic realities, which return ‘to haunt the living in the form of a ghostly inheritance’ (802). Hence, it can be said that *Monkey Beach* deals with the impact of residential schools on Native people and thereby focuses on the psychological influence the system has on the people concerned and even on later generations.

Furthermore, Robinson points out traumatic events by means of irony and humor. For instance, it is ironic that Trudy eventually gets psychological therapy in Port Alberni in a treatment center for addicts and alcoholics 'where the res school used to be' (*Monkey* 310). Also, the author inserts a joke that aims to shock the readers:

Another woman laughed, then said, "Hey, how many priests does it take to change a lightbulb?"

"How many?"

"Three. One to screw it, one to beat it for being screwed and one to tell the lawyers that no screwing took place."

"That's not funny," Josh said.

"That's the point," the woman said. (*Monkey* 310)

Unlike *Monkey Beach*, the protagonist of *Slash* encounters racial harassment at a very early stage in his life when being transferred to a residential school. Not only does the principal divide the pupils into whites and Natives, which marks a clear racial separation, but the Native children are also stereotyped as dirty pickpockets: "'We'll get along just fine as long as you don't steal from the other kids. I want you all to wait here while the nurse comes to check your heads'" (*Slash* 8f).

Although Tommy learnt from his father that "We are the people who have every right to be here" (*Slash* 8), the principal rejects this avowal by declaring that "'You Indians are lucky to be here'" (*Slash* 8). The white pupils at school soon take up the principal's attitude and start to insult the Native children: "You friggin' Injuns are nothing but thieves, full of lice, everybody knows that!" (*Slash* 9).

One attempt to flee from the internalized subjugation and the inequalities is to rise up against the material and psychological oppression in form of rebellion and revolution. Hence, Tommy's early experiences with racism trigger his interest in political activism. He leaves the reserve at the age of 17 and travels through North America, where he encounters different groups of indigenous peoples who teach him about important events of the political movement: most importantly, the "Red Patrol" in Canada and the "American Indian Movement" in the USA. According to Alba,

'[a]llusions to the gravity of the situation and the poor state of intercultural relations in both countries are extensively dealt with through Slash's eyes. Slash took part in the American and Canadian Indian movements with the aim of learning.' (n.p.)

By participating in political debates and council meetings, Tommy is introduced to the language of politics. Although in the beginning he struggles to understand what they are

discussing ('Seemed like everybody was so smart and already knew everything' *Slash* 36), a process of development can be observed as he learns how to use the political jargon and eventually manages to contribute to meetings and debates: 'I learned quite a lot during the meetings' (*Slash* 36) and 'began to see [...] more and more clearly' (*Slash* 117). In the course of time, Tommy turns out to be a talented spokesperson for people who share his opinion. However, Tommy also develops a particularly "male" attitude and gets a 'tough-guy image' (Currie 145) when being involved in parties where 'chicks' (*Slash* 54) serve as a mere entertainment.

What Tommy also realizes is that there is a split in the Native community that divides the people who are struggling for recognition. According to Emberley, '[t]he dualism of internal colonialism is rendered in the divisions among Native peoples, [...] fighting for equal access to capitalist expansion and the market economy' (136). These two distinct groups, labeled "assimilationists" and "traditionalists", are divergent in their opinion about the incorporation into mainstream society. While the former aim to "fit in", the latter try to preserve their cultural heritage without losing basic rights in society. At a young age, Tommy already reflects on the demand to assimilate into mainstream society:

I know our people are trying their best to do better with all those 'Help Our Natives Help Themselves' projects. What it's all about, it seems to me, is that those things really mean 'Help Indians become more middle-class whites. (*Slash* 37)

According to Armstrong, 'the assimilation process is achieved through language, [...] and] disempowerment of our people was achieved through language and is continuous in that process' (qtd. in Isernhagen 143). However, assimilation is also 'an all-too-common attempt to avoid the pain of self-hatred by denying or negating that which is defined as inferior – which, paradoxically, only causes more pain' (Currie 143). This becomes clear in statements such as, '(y)ou never know why you feel so shitty inside and why you feel so much contempt for Indians yourself' (*Slash* 222).

The split in opinions between First Nations peoples as well as the impact of racism feeds destructive processes of identification in Tommy, which lead to despair and hatred. His anger is best reflected in one of the most crucial scenes in the novel when Tommy is attacked by a gang of white people with a knife, turns wild and literally

slashes the aggressors as well as policemen, for which he is given the nickname “Slash” (*Slash* 38f).

Unfortunately, Slash develops the idea that a change of conditions can only be attained in a violent manner, which reflects the attitude of many Native activists at that time, especially members of the Red Power movement:

Every time a meeting would come up, though, I would go straight, and the anger would build up. [...] At them times, I felt like a machine gun, I would have to run out and start shooting at any white man passing. (*Slash* 95)

Although ‘violence for the sake of violence is always implicitly devalued in the novel’ (Alba, n.p.), Slash almost forgets the main principle of the organization: that the “AIM is a spiritual movement” (*Slash* 120). At one point, he is even ready to die for his beliefs: ‘I knew I was facing some risks: the worst being prison again and the easiest being death’ (*Slash* 88).

What Slash needs to understand is that the process of identification for First Nations peoples is destructive because they are only offered two options: ‘assimilate or get lost’ (*Slash* 49). These insufficient political choices leave no room for a traditional approach that still fits into modern society. Using the knowledge and wisdom of the lifestyle he was exposed to in his early youth, Slash acknowledges that ‘they [his family] were neither assimilated nor lost. They were just Indian and didn’t mind one bit’ (*Slash* 49). At this point, he finds himself at a crossroad, where he ‘wondered why they couldn’t understand that people needed to feel strong. That they needed to be able to have choices to make. That it is the struggle for it that heals’ (*Slash* 130). According to Margery Fee, ‘neither the Native subject position nor this political position is presented as obvious, [...] but as the result of a continuing process of struggle’ (173).

In the course of this ‘struggle’, Slash takes part in several events of the Red Power movement, and so the reader learns about important historic moments from an “insider’s” point of view. Thereby, the author manages to convey a feeling of being drawn into the movement by inserting rallying cries such as ‘We’d rather be Red than dead’ (*Slash* 35). Furthermore, the feeling of being involved in the movement is achieved by the direct speech of many characters involved and by the reflections of the protagonist:

I never went to them [sic] meetings much. The times I went to interpret for Pra-cwa, people there seemed to try to impress each other about how well they could talk English, and how much they could look important with business suits and all. They didn't seem to worry too much about what was really wrong on the reserves, but they passed a lot of fancy-worded resolutions. (*Slash* 35)

The political events described in the novel are too numerous to mention them all here in detail. However, what the discussions all have in common is the fact that they circulate around the issue of economic progress. According to Green,

various progress discourses provide the ideological grounding for organization as diverse as DIA, AIM, the Catholic Church, and the Red Patrol. Although these groups often see themselves in opposition to one another, they all employ similar means to *achieve* their diverse ends. (57)

What constitutes a key point in Tommy's political development is the moment he joins the AIM outside the Kamloops courthouse to protest against the death of a Native person through police brutality (*Slash* 64). Tommy gets to know Harold Cardinal, the publisher of *The Unjust Society* as a response to Trudeau's "White Paper". Similar to the influence Cardinal had on Native people and on the establishment of the National Indian Brotherhood (NIB), he gives Tommy confidence and induces his fight for equality and recognition.

There are two other major political events that are depicted in great detail. On the one hand, the "Trail of Broken Treaties" caravan is described at the beginning of Chapter 3, titled "Mixing it up", when Tommy is highly motivated to rebel against society and to reclaim his rights as a Native person. Referring back to the "Trail of Tears", Tommy explains to the reader,

This was the route taken in 1838 when tribes in the southeastern U.S.A. were uprooted to give place to white settlers. They were forced to march under military custody from Georgia to Oklahoma. Literally thousands had died on that route, from cold, hunger and fatigue. I hadn't heard of it, but then I guess that was the point of this whole trip: to educate. (*Slash* 71)

According to Virginie Alba, '[t]he links between taking part in the March [sic], re-learning the peoples and the territories' history, sharing the pain, and building a sense of pan-Indian community are obvious here' (n.p.). This means that the "Trail of Broken Treaties" caravan depicts the whole spectrum of objectives in the Native activist movements: joining together as a unity, remembering the Native heritage, reviving their traditions and taking steps against government regulations. Hence, this caravan is

exemplary for other marches that took place during that period, echoing the theme and the spirit felt by the participants.

In great detail, the author portrays the hardships the participants feel, the difficulties they have in organizing such a nation-wide happening and the anger and hatred that develop after their desire to debate with government officials in Washington D.C. was declined. As Tommy reflects,

everybody inside was getting more tired and angrier all the time. More and more stuff was being broken and made into weapons and everybody was pulling out papers and stuff out of files and dumping them on the floors. Broken glass and stuff was scattered all over by then. Flags and portraits were pulled down. Some guys draped flags around themselves upside down, as a distress signal. Outside, the B.I.A. negotiations were getting hotter and hotter and threats were getting heavier and heavier. (*Slash* 81)

In this excerpt, the attitude of Native activists becomes clear, and via such a vivid account the reader is drawn into the events and asked to take a position.

The occupation of “Wounded Knee” at the Pine Ridge reserve is also an event that has great importance, and, similar to the “Trail of Broken Treaties” caravan, it ‘functions as a synecdoche for other sites of resistance’ (Jones 54).

What is noticeable in the novel is that the situation for Native people is becoming more and more intense at the beginning of the 1970s since racism is overtly practiced: ‘It really shook us up, and we realized that things were a lot more serious than the sit-ins and stuff before that occupation, and that there was going to be open season on Indians, any Indians’ (*Slash* 86).

However, Armstrong does not only depict the political situation at the Pine Ridge reserve, but the focus is also on the media coverage and how it influences the course of events and people’s attitude towards the uprising: ‘The press was really playing it up, saying it was a heavily armed standoff and that the situation was ‘very grave’ (*Slash* 85). Furthermore, *Slash* comments on the circumstance that the media can also be manipulative and biased, which further illustrates the institutional racism towards Natives: ‘The reports were supposed to be one-sided. Nobody was supposed to hear the Indian’s side, I guess, in case some truth came out’ (*Slash* 88).

According to Margery Fee, however, in *Slash* the ‘focus is not on *events* [...] but on *talk*’ (170f). Therefore, it is important to analyze the manner in which political debates

and meetings are depicted in the novel; namely, as a diversity of political beliefs and competing opinions. The reader repeatedly gets to know Slash's opinion by direct comments or his reflection, 'but also the direct speech of many different characters, most of them disagreeing with Slash. These narrators are constituted as speaking for themselves' (Fee 172). In such a multi-vocal discussion, the statements made 'are never accusatory, but rather are represented as divergent conceptions' (Alba, n.p.).

Armstrong refers this kind of discourse back to the concept of En'owkin; a process in which 'nothing is discarded or prejudged' ("Courage" 4). The author describes it as

a mediation process especially designed for community. It is a process that seeks to build solidarity and develop remediated outcomes that will be acceptable, by informed choice, to all who will be affected. ("Courage" 7)

For instance, there are many debates that deal with land claims and the ownership of land. Due to the collective organization of the talk, the author brings forward different perceptions on historical processes and events, in which every individual has the possibility to share his or her understanding of the situation. To give an example, Tommy once has a discussion with a man called Sam whether pressing land claims would better their economic situation or not (*Slash* 117f). The two men argue back and forth, and through direct statements the reader gets the feeling that one can overhear a balanced and unprejudiced discussion.

The method of a multifold discourse is further emphasized by the reference to government documents and reports, 'supplementing them with alternative perspectives, responding to them, or reframing them' (Jones 56). Thereby, the novel manages to work against binary positions and evokes fruitful debates.

Nevertheless, the debates are not always fruitful for Slash but appear in cycles that mark the repetitive ups and downs of the movement. The process of realizing that they have to make a "third choice" besides assimilation or extinction is 'gradual, painful and repetitive' (Fee 171). At one point in the novel, Slash observes that

[m]any of the meetings and sessions didn't seem to have any real focus on what to do or how to begin to do it. Instead these sessions were a lot of what could be called "bitching" sessions, where everybody would denounce white governments, the D.I.A. and other things like prejudice in general. There were no solutions planned, just reactions to things. (*Slash* 93)

Once again, this passage illustrates the difficulty that Native people had in expressing their aims and hence in reaching a common goal.

In *Medicine River*, the focus of the novel does not lie on political events and movements but rather on the struggle of Native people in everyday life. Yet, various subtle comments on and references to the time of colonization and political activism can be detected in the novel.

For instance, when Will and Harlen visit Martha Oldcrow in Rolling Fish Coulee outside the reserve to get a birthday present, they get lost and find the cabin only by accident. Harlen remarks, ““This is just like the explorers”” (*Medicine* 133). One can regard this statement as an ironic comment on the condition that early explorers discovered the American continent incidentally.

Yet, there is another episode in the novel that refers to the exclusion of Natives from mainstream “national” history. When Harlen and Will drive past the Custer National Monument outside Billings, they debate whether they are allowed in or not:

“You think they let Indians in?”

“Why would they keep us out?”

“Harlen, it’s probably just a bunch of plaques and some farmer’s field with a fancy fence around it.”

“History, it’s part of our history.”

“The Blackfoot didn’t fight Custer.”

Harlen shook his head and patted me on the shoulder. “Pretty hard to see the bigger picture, when you’re depressed.” (*Medicine* 102f)

In this passage, the author comments on the fact that Natives must not be seen as one homogenous group but as a diversity of different cultures, and on the other hand it illustrates the fact that there is not such a thing as “our” common history but different versions of history depending on the point of view.

After consulting ‘one of those tourist books that tells all about Little Bighorn’ (*Medicine* 103) and the historic events happening there, Will and Harlen decide to visit Custer’s gravestone.

“You still got some film in your camera, Will? I want to get a picture of us standing over Custer’s grave. Maybe send it to the *Kainai News*. Put a big caption under it says, ‘Custer Died for Your Sins.’ What do you think?”

I wasn’t that depressed.

“Dumb idea”, I said. (*Medicine* 106)

This passage is exemplary for King’s ironic comments on grand narratives like the Bible, when he combines the Christian phrase “Jesus died for your sins” with the

important historical figure of General Custer, who was killed at the Battle of Little Bighorn by Native warriors. At this point, “Your Sins” clearly refers to the white people’s wrong deeds towards Natives, and hence can be seen as a political statement by the author.

Furthermore, there are allusions to political events in *Medicine River* through the use of symbols, in particular through symbolic clothes. For instance, Harlen appears with ‘a red T-shirt that said Indian Power’ (*Medicine* 17), which clearly refers to the Red Power movement. Later in the novel there is an allusion to Joanne Cardinal Schubert’s war shirts (*Medicine* 101), an artist well known for her extreme ideas on contemporary Native experiences and her condemnation of “white” religious and governmental systems.

Similar to his later novel *Green Grass, Running Water*, King attributes a certain importance to a jacket:

He stood in the middle of the studio and looked around, and I could see the back of his jacket, and I knew who he was. David Plume.
I had never met David, but I knew the jacket. It was an ordinary club jacket, red nylon with knit cuffs and waistband. Across the back in large white letters was the word AIM. [...]
That jacket was famous. People who didn’t know David, like me, knew the jacket. (*Medicine* 182)

Here, it becomes apparent that the author creates a mythic image about the piece of clothing which serves to convey a political statement by the person who wears it. The reader gets to know David Plume in an earlier passage in the novel, but only after the jacket is introduced does one realize the importance he has as a former activist who wants Will to fix his “‘famous picture [...] the FBI or the RCMP would love to get their hands on’” (*Medicine* 184). Only gradually is the significance of the photograph taken on the morning of the police bombardment at Wounded Knee revealed to the reader.

By putting on the jacket he wore at this historic event, David believes to have a certain authority: “‘This jacket has power’” (*Medicine* 186). Other people at the reserve, however, envy David for his experiences and detest him for his pride, since he is “‘the only one who went to Wounded Knee from around here.’” As Harlen remarks, “[t]hings would be easier if he didn’t wear the jacket all the time” (*Medicine* 189). Wearing the jacket eventually leads to a fight with Ray at the local bar, when Ray provokes David stating, “‘what does AIM mean? Friend of mine says it stands for Assholes in

Moccasins. [...] I heard that most of those AIM peckers are ex-cons and perverts” (*Medicine* 241). Such statements indicate that there is also a split in opinions about the Indian movement by Native peoples.

Similar to Slash, David is a character who shares his feelings about political events: “I was never scared at Wounded Knee. Most of the time we just sat around and talked. Most of the time we sat and waited. Most days, it was boring as hell” (*Medicine* 188). Again, the frustration and anger about sitting around and not being able to change the situation is evident here. On the other hand, David stands for prospects that change might happen in the future: “We’re on our way to Ottawa. [...] Government wants to cut the money for Indian education. [...] It feels good to be part of something important” (*Medicine* 191).

Comparable to King’s novel, *Monkey Beach* deals with political events through a side character: Lisa’s uncle Mick. As mentioned earlier, he rejects the influence of white people on the lives of Natives and hence becomes an active member of the AIM. For instance, he does not understand why Natives have to pay taxes and thereby finance a political system they reject, as the following quote illustrates: “Why? The whole fucking country is on Indian land. We’re not supposed to pay any taxes on or off reserves” (*Monkey* 30f). This passage mirrors the belief of AIM activists that Natives were exploited and deprived from their lands.

By taking Mick as her role model, Lisa begins to get interested in the injustice that Native people have experienced and starts to imitate Mick’s behavior. For instance, she starts singing, “Fuck the Oppressors”, a song that Mick has taught her, and disturbs the history lesson by telling “it’s all lies” (*Monkey* 69) when

[the teacher] had forced us to read a book that said that the Indians on the northwest coast of British Columbia had killed and eaten people as religious sacrifices. My teacher had made us each read a paragraph out loud. When my turn came, I sat there shaking, absolutely furiously. (*Monkey* 68)

This passage is comparable to an episode in Culleton Mosionier’s *In Search of April Raintree*, when the protagonist’s sister Cheryl starts to rebel against the false portrayal of Natives in history books. It is indicative of the false, one-sided portrayal of Native people in history and of the pain that people suffer when being confronted with such accounts.

Like King, Robinson makes use of symbolic clothes which denote political activism, particularly when characterizing Mick as often wearing an AIM T-shirt (*Monkey* 56). The author also alludes to several political events, i.e. meeting his friends from 'AIM-ster days' (*Monkey* 141), the occupation of the B.I.A. building in Washington (*Monkey* 72), and the "Trail of Broken Treaties" caravan (*Monkey* 146).

Eventually, as Lisa is swallowed by the water and almost drowns, the last message she receives from her family is her uncle Mick singing, "Hiya, Monster. Don't listen to her. You go out there and give 'em hell. Red Power!" (*Monkey* 373). Such an ending of the novel illustrates Mick's (and the author's) hope for the future that activism and the fight for equality and justice will be carried on by later generations. Only after she hears her relatives motivating her to keep fighting and singing a traditional Haisla farewell song to her, she hears the sound of a speedboat in the distance, which is likely to rescue her.

To sum up, one can say that *Slash* presents historic events "realistically" as told from the point of view of a colonized speaker. The author discards the superiority of colonizer over colonized by producing new modes of representation. As Margery Fee puts it, Armstrong 'establishes an oppositional discourse [which] open[s] up a space between the negative stereotype of the Indian and the romanticized popular view' (169f). She generates a manifold discourse which includes many different opinions that are equally valid, and manages to work against the manifestation of history as "true" and "unchangeable", thereby rejecting biased histories. In other words, the 'discourses that Armstrong highlights operate outside of the progress/regress binary' (Green 61).

Medicine River can also be seen as a critique of the predominant society that has influenced indigenous peoples to a great extent until today. Furthermore, it comes about as a cross-cultural novel that demands cross-cultural interpretation. Similar to *Slash*, although in a different fashion, it supports 'resistance to political amnesia and insist[s] on the importance of acknowledging and exploring the contradictions of colonizing histories' (Andrews and Walton, n.p.).

Robinson uses the mode of the Gothic novel as a means to comment on the historic and the present impact of colonization on Native peoples, most importantly the residential school system. Unlike *Slash*, *Monkey Beach* focuses more on the psychological influence of colonization and suppression. The author creates a novel that

is subversive and distinctly moral in its disapproval of white people's treatment of the Haisla people.

All in all, the three novels are political in a way that they tackle important historic events and describe the impact those events had and still have on the lives of Native peoples. Thus, they form a political act in themselves, aiming at the termination of racism and the deconstruction of stereotypical assumptions about "their own people", and pointing out the possibility and necessity 'to practise an alternative Canadian history and cultural politics' (Jones 51).

5. “All My Relations” – The Quest for Individual and Communal Identity

5.1. The Search for the “Self” as a Characteristic of the Red Power Novel

The concept of identity is indeed very complex, but what is important to note here is that ‘identity is never simply a matter of genetic make-up or natural birthright. [...] For people out on the edge, out on the road, identity is a matter of will, a matter of choice, a face to be shaped in a ceremonial act’ (Rayna Green, qtd. in Schneider 288). According to Calhoun, ‘identity is always constructed and situated in a field and amid a flow of contending cultural discourses’ (12). This means there are various concepts and discourses about identity, and it is also an aspect that influences people in their everyday lives because it determines their linkage to a specific social group.

Hence, ‘identity is quite probably *the* central site for the preservation of tribal culture, history, and nationhood. For a theory of identity to serve either cause, we require a means to determine which conceptions of identity best guide this process of decolonization and cultural renewal’ (17), as Teuton states. This means that one has to ask how indigenous peoples can achieve a form of self-representation that serves the preservation of their traditions as well as the revival of their cultures.

Many critics, in Canada and the United States alike, have come to the conclusion that

any definition of American Indian identity obviously must begin with Indians themselves [...]. Definitions of any human community can never adequately contain the multiplicities, the inexhaustible readings of a collective of individual lives – yet each needs to accommodate the other, the individual and the community.’ (Shanley 43)

To put it differently, Natives have to be given the opportunity to define themselves and to establish concepts of identity that serve their own needs as individuals and as communities.

In the selected novels, it becomes clear that the “reappropriation of history” is a necessary step in the struggle to regain the historical consciousness that is essential towards establishing ethnic identity’ (Karrer and Lutz 34f). Yet, ‘while ethnicity can be seen as providing a person with an identity and thus enabling him or her to play a role in society, it can also turn into a straitjacket’ (Kuester and Keller 15). This denotes that the

identification of an individual with an ethnic community can be both liberating and confining because it constrains a person to a distinct role. However, in the novels it is apparent that such a limitation is necessary for attaining a position in society that gives them the most assurance and comfort. In other words, the process of finding one's identity is in fact a 'struggle to find his or her unique and emotionally or materially most awarding [sic] position within the continuum' (Karrer and Lutz 29).

In *Slash*, Tommy's character development from youth to adolescence and his search for the true self cannot be regarded on the personal level alone but have to be observed in the broader political and social field.

In the first chapter, titled "The Awakening", the traditional lifestyle of Tommy and his family at the reserve is introduced to the reader when Tommy comments on the tradition of storytelling, singing Coyote Songs, learning some medical knowledge, harvesting food and speaking a Native language:

He [Uncle Joe] told me about a long time ago, how our people used to live. [...] He showed me lots of plants and things for curing sicknesses. [...] Uncle Joe sometimes sang the Coyote Song while he drummed on Pop's hand drum. (*Slash* 7)

Such a traditional way of life, however, is soon contrasted to the life of the dominant Western culture Tommy is exposed to when entering a predominantly white town school. Although he uses the opportunity to learn how to read and write and hence is able to help his father and his grandfather Prac'wa read documents from the government, he is also confronted with stereotypes and racism at school. Having to deal with stereotypical images about himself affects Tommy in such a way that he begins to reject his own culture, which becomes clear in the following passage:

I sure hated my looks and my clothes, especially when I wished I could join in some of the lunch hour or after school games the other kids played. They never would ask us to play with them though. (*Slash* 9)

Another important factor that influences the renunciation of his heritage is the exposure to English, a language foreign to the young boy, for most of the day. Since not being able to use the Native language may be regarded as a main attribute of oppression, it implies that the person is in a subaltern position and has to conform to standards other than those of his or her own culture. According to Ashcroft,

[l]anguage becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated, and the medium through which conceptions of 'truth', 'order', and 'reality' become established. (7)

As Tommy starts to discard his mother tongue, he simultaneously puts behind 'concepts that are just not available in English' (Armstrong, qtd. in Isernhagen 144). He is influenced by the speech of his peers, 'entangling him in a progressive/traditional binary that forces him to choose between the lifestyle promoted by his new friends and the ways of his family' (Green 56). Consequently, Tommy does not know how to communicate anymore and finds himself in-between different cultures.

What constitutes the conflict is that Native people are caught between a traditional and modern way of life, since they 'have their roots not only in their Indian heritage and family attachments, but also in a contemporary [North] America of rock music, McDonald's fast food, country-western songs and TV' (Georgi-Findlay 170f). This is reflected, for instance, in *Monkey Beach* when the author refers to 'Kraft foods', 'Spam' and 'marshmallows' (*Monkey* 12), which is then contrasted to traditional food like 'cockles' (*Monkey* 26) and 'oolichan grease' (*Monkey* 86).

Critics have argued that identity conflicts of Native people are at least to some extent responsible for the epidemic of suicide, addiction, and imprisonment in Native societies. Armstrong comments on the fact that there is a growing rate of addictions among Natives in contemporary Canada as follows: 'The suicide rates and problems our people are having are a result of being told you're stupid, ignorant, a drunk [...]. To me, that's the biggest lie of all that needs to be dispelled' (qtd. in Williamson 116). She points out how Natives are affected by false images about themselves, and how they try to deal with such stereotypical assumptions.

This is apparent in *Slash* and *Monkey Beach* when both protagonists turn to drugs and alcohol as a result of conflicts that seem irreconcilable to them. However, the abuse of intoxicating substances makes them indifferent towards their surroundings and takes them further apart from their families as well as from mainstream society. It triggers a feeling of loneliness and depression because there are no ties to the outside world, especially to their own communities:

"What a night, hey?" I said.

[...] She watched me with a curiously unmoved expression, like I was someone she didn't know.

Six guys and three girls were passed out in the next room. I couldn't remember any of them. None of their faces was familiar. Beer cans were piled on the tables, and the lingering cloud of cigarette haze spoke of a long, drawn-out party. (*Monkey* 298)

While Lisa gets help from a ghostly vision of her cousin Tab, Slash can only overcome his addiction by realizing that racism is “the main reason why [...] lots of Indians are drunk. It makes me real mad inside that our people seem to be looked on as if we were less instead of just different” (*Slash* 63).

In *Medicine River*, the focus does not lie on destructive forces such as drug and alcohol abuse (although Will spends a lot of time with his friends at ‘The American’, a local bar), but the author repeatedly puts forward the question what a “real Indian” is and hence joins in the debate about the authenticity of indigenous people. Unlike other authors, however, King does so in a humorous manner.

For instance, while Eddie Weaselhead tries to be as Native as possible with his traditional outer appearance (a bone choker and a ribbon shirt), Harlen comments on a character on TV (the Native actor Will Sampson) who seems “real Indian too” (*Medicine* 10). By bringing in such divergent images of Natives – an authentic and a fake one – the author comments on the fact that there is not *one* version of a Native person but a multitude of identities that all have equal status.

Another episode in which Eddie and Big John, both employees of the Friendship Centre in Medicine River, argue about their “Indianness”, perfectly exemplifies the divergent attitudes about Native identity. By depicting the characters in clear opposition to one another, yet letting both appear as outsiders of society because of their appearance, King offers an ironic comment on what a Native is or has to be. While Eddie is “far too Indian” for his community – he wears ‘more jewellery and stuff than that queer guy [who] used to play piano on television’ and looks like ‘a walking powwow poster’ (*Medicine* 53) – Big John imitates the look of a white businessman, wearing a ‘dark pin-striped suit with a white shirt and a burnt-orange tie with ducks stitched into it’ (*Medicine* 54) and therefore seems equally strange to the Native population of Medicine River. Eventually, both Eddie and Ray are imprisoned for a fight, triggered by calling each other “a pretend Indian” and “an apple” (*Medicine* 54f), which can be seen as a parody of the fact that Natives are given certain roles and images which they dismiss.

Furthermore, King inserts a description of a “real Indian woman” in *Medicine River*, when Berta presents herself in a dating advertisement as follows:

“I’m a Blood Indian woman in good health with lots of friends who say I’m good-looking. I’m not a skinny woman, and I graduated from high school. I got a good job and I’ve raised four kids and have no objection to a couple more. [...] I like to go fishing and hunting, and I play bingo every Thursday.” (*Medicine* 170)

Here, King combines all the stereotypical assumptions concerning a Native woman – playing bingo and hunting in their leisure time – to an ironic comment which puzzles the non-Native audience and simultaneously liberates Native readers.

On the other hand, King provides a description of a respected elder, Lionel James, who ‘showcases “Indianness” to European audiences willing to pay for displays of Native authenticity’ (Christie 56), as the following passage illustrates:

“People want me to talk about what it’s like to be an Indian. Crazy world. Lots of white people seem real interested in knowing about Indians. Crazy world. So I go all over the world now, and talk about Indian ways and how my grandparents lived, and sometimes I sing a little. I used to dance, too, but my leg hurts too bad now. Most of the time, I tell stories.” (*Medicine* 162f)

However, Lionel laments the close association of Natives with their traditional past, which limits and undermines belief that past, present and future are interrelated: ““They want to hear stories about how Indians used to be. I got real good stories, funny ones, about how things are now, but those people say, no, tell us about the olden days. So I do”” (*Medicine* 165).

Being treated as a “real Indian” at those events, he experiences how foreigners react to his authentic stories about Native traditions of the past, and he reflects on the cultural differences as follows: ““Crazy world. Everybody on the reserve know [sic] that story. Those people in Japan just got up and started clapping. Same thing happened in Germany, [...] just got up and clapped. Like they never heard that story before”” (*Medicine* 166f).

One of the issues related to authenticity in Native identity is the importance of naming¹²³. This becomes clear in yet another humorous episode in *Medicine River*, when Louise has a baby girl and Will is mistakenly regarded as her father:

“I’ll bet you have a name all picked out for her.” [...]

¹²³ See Beutell 46f.

“Yeah,” I said, feeling really good with the baby in my arms, “we’ll probably call her South Wing.” I guess I expected the nurse to laugh, but she didn’t.

“Is that a traditional Indian name?”

“I was just joking.”

“No, I think it’s a beautiful name.” [...]

On the card on the bassinet, the nurse had written “South Wing Heavyman.”
(*Medicine* 38f)

In this short episode, King wittily comments on the false expectations non-Natives people have about indigenous traditions, and how these assumptions are clearly not legitimate. By means of humor, he turns stereotypical beliefs upside down and hence puts Natives in the position of authority and power.

According to Karrer and Lutz, ‘minority literature often starts from alienation and moves towards personal identity through practice, memory or ceremony’ (39). In this view, the individual character is ‘completed in relation to the others’ (Bevis, qtd. in Schneider 290). Lutz describes such a plot as a ‘journey of initiation or cultural immersion’ (“Native” 39), while William Bevis calls it ‘homing’ (qtd. in Schneider 290).

In First Nations literature, the quest for the self is almost exclusively depicted as a spiritual (and physical) journey back to where the person belongs. Such a process of coming home to engage in one’s own cultural background, however, ‘does not mean a return to the margins, but rather a return to the centre, thus inverting and subverting the stereotype of reserves as somehow outside the core of the state’ (McMaster, qtd. in Valaskakis 245).

Before being able to return home, the protagonists have to learn about their own culture, since most of the traditional knowledge has been forgotten. As Martha Oldcrow laments in *Medicine River*, ““Young boys don’t know anything today.”” (*Medicine* 135), while Tommy admits in *Slash*, ‘I didn’t know a lot about real Indian things’ (*Slash* 145).

The ‘newly-acquired knowledge and understanding of the past and of the traditional teachings then help him to come to terms with his own, more recent history’ (Schneider 291). To give an example, *Slash* remembers the tradition of performing a

Winter Dance¹²⁴ while being in prison. Unconsciously, he begins to sing one of Uncle Joe's songs, which gives him relief and comfort and helps him to accept the fact that he has to spend his time in prison in a useful manner:

I knew it was near to Winter Dance time at home. [...] In my mind, I heard the songs and smelled the fire smoke in the big room where the dances were held. [...] All at once I heard my cellmate ask softly, "You okay, Tommy?" and I realized it was me singing that song.

I couldn't stop for a long time. I just sang until there were no more tears and the song became happy and light. [...]

After that, I was okay. The tightness in my chest seemed to have gone. I guess you could say I felt free, kind of, even though I was in prison. Feelings like that made me decide that I should make the best of my stay there. I inquired about finishing my education. (*Slash* 47f)

The plot then goes in circles of doubting and believing in the values of Native traditions. Eventually, Tommy encounters a medicine man, who profoundly changes the course of his life. He teaches him that the key to the future lies, ironically, in the past. Only through the understanding and the approval of the traditional ways of life, "to do it the Indian way", healing can begin for the protagonist and his relations:

Something touched me deep inside, and I came out of there a new person. It was like suddenly waking up, like what those people say about being born again. All the questions that were unanswered for years, suddenly seemed so simple. I knew with my whole self that this was what being Indian was all about. (*Slash* 163)

According to Noel Currie, it becomes clear in the novel that the "Indian approach" to any issue, which involves an understanding of tradition and laws, is more productive than purely political analysis' (148). What is important in this context is 'practice as preservation' (209), as Nancy Van Styvendale writes; in other words, the fact that traditions have to be kept alive by practicing them instead of letting them rust on museum shelves. The following statement of Tommy emphasizes this fact: 'I understood then that the practice of things separated us from other peoples. I realized then that's what culture is' (*Slash* 172).

As Tommy finds out, he is chosen to be the 'keeper of the ways' (*Slash* 167) of his family; someone who has to preserve, practice and pass on traditional knowledge. Together with Maeg, 'they plant the seeds which can make revolutionary changes in the

¹²⁴ According to Carstens, the Winter Dance is a 'highly developed symbolic ceremony expressing both secular and sacred spheres of life. [...] From the point of the participants, each dance reinforces ties of both kinship and friendship.' See Carstens 10.

future' (Currie 149). Their son Marlon, also named Little Chief, constitutes the hope 'for the survival of what is human in an inhuman world' (*Slash* 207) and the optimistic view that future generation of Native peoples will be able to reach an equal status in society. As *Slash* expresses his hope to his son,

“You, my little man, are named Little Chief. Someday you will grow to be strong and straight for your people. [...] You are our hope. You are an Indian of a special generation. Your world will be hard, but you will grow up proud to be Indian.” (*Slash* 206)

In *Monkey Beach*, the protagonist also has to relearn cultural knowledge from her grandmother. Lisa is greatly influenced by Ma-ma-oo's wisdom and knowledge about picking q°alh'm (*Monkey* 73), smoking the house with *oxasuli* roots to keep away ghosts (*Monkey* 151) and celebrating the birthdays of ancestors by burning gifts (*Monkey* 78). Only after having acquired some traditional knowledge and equipped with a better understanding of her “gift” and her culture, Lisa can eventually come home to heal and take her place in society. Similar to *Slash*, she is chosen to take over the traditions of her ancestors and shows great respect towards the spiritual world, as the following passage exemplifies:

On Mick's birthday, Jimmy followed me down to the Octopus Beds. [...] I bought a tin of Sago tobacco, a portable stereo and an Elvis tape. I picked up all the dry driftwood that I could carry, and made a fire. I turned on the tape recorder, and Elvis sang “Such a Night.” [...] “For Mick,” I said, throwing loose tobacco on the fire. (*Monkey* 147f)

Will, on the other hand, is only gradually drawn into the life in Medicine River, where he finds relatives and friends who help him to come to terms with the past and to reconnect with his ancestors. The process of healing is triggered by a pivotal point in his life, when he agrees to take a family portrait of Joyce and Elvis Blue Horn whereby almost the whole community shows up:

“Does the special mean all the family?”
 “Yes, it does”
 “I got a big family.” [...]]
 “The photo special is for immediate family.”
 Harlen wiped his eyes with his shirt sleeve. “Oh, ... then we're only talking about fifty people or so.”
 Harelen liked to exaggerate. I knew that. And there was no way I could get fifty people in the studio for a photograph [...]

Well, I did make an attempt at remembering some of the names. And I tried to keep count. By twelve-thirty, there were in the vicinity of fifty-four people – adults and kids – in my studio. (*Medicine* 194; 196f)

This humorous episode exemplifies that by Native definition, ‘a big family is everyone’ (Davidson 195). In this event, however, Will finds acceptance in the community when they explicitly ask him to be “‘part of the picture’” (Peters 69).

5.2. Relatedness to Land and Community

As it is apparent in the novels, the birthplaces of the protagonists are part of their heritage and therefore play an important role in their search for identity. In other words, ‘their attachment to land remains essential to their identity as Native persons’ (Lutz 186). As Karrer and Lutz assert, the

“land ethos” of Native peoples is more than just ecological concern for Mother Earth, it is quite literally the notion that land in general and certain places in particular [...] are sacred shrines, essential for the survival of a tribal religion and the people tied to it. (37)

This means that indigenous and non-Native people have a different conception of land, since for the former the home place is ‘a place of honour’ (McKenzie 64f). For them, the relation to land means ‘being tied into and part of everything else’ (Armstrong “Disorder”). As Armstrong further explains, ‘[w]e join with the larger self and with the land, and rejoice in all that we are’ (“Disorder”).

According to Eigenbrod, the “rootedness” of indigenous peoples does not mean immobility but rather a deep connection to the ecologic as well as the social context.¹²⁵

This means that Natives do not only feel connected to their environment, but also to the community that surrounds them. King confirms this view when he writes that

“All my relations” is at first a reminder of who we are and of our relationship with both our family and our relatives. It also reminds us of the extended relationship we share with all human beings ... extending to the animals ... to all the animate and inanimate forms that can be seen or imagined. (*Relations* ix)

In the novels, the protagonists do not strive for wealth or power but for integration in society. According to Isabel Schneider, ‘[t]heir Native ancestry is part of who they are

¹²⁵ See Eigenbrod “Travelling” 33.

not only genetically but as a person, and as long as they do not acknowledge it, they cannot be happy, balanced, ‘whole’ (Schneider 292). Thus, the protagonists all have a feeling that there is something missing in their lives, which they cannot easily explain. They strive for completeness and harmony; feelings they have been denied due to conflicting world-views and belief systems. What they all long for is being part of a community, which, according to Armstrong, ‘is the living process that interacts with the vast and ancient body of intricately connected patterns operating in perfect unison called the land’ (“Courage” 3).

In *Slash*, Armstrong explores the connections between individual and collective empowerment since the protagonist develops in a Native community. As Armstrong asserts, in an indigenous society ‘[n]o person is born isolated [...], you are automatically a part of the community’ (“Disorder”). This becomes clear when Tommy realizes that he has a specific place in the group, and other people rely on his skills and abilities: ‘I learned that, being an Indian, I could never be a person only to myself. I was part of the rest of the people. [...] I learned how important and how precious my existence was. I was necessary’ (*Slash* 164f).

There are several incidents when Tommy experiences a deep trust and bond to his community. A perfect example for the feeling of harmony and integration is provided when Tommy’s family forms a circle and performs a ‘friendship dance’ at a demonstration at Okanagan Falls:

We all joined hands and started the circle moving to the song. I knew how everybody felt. I felt it spreading all around the circle. I heard it in the voices of the people.

The drum vibrated and the sound coursed through every fibre of my body as I moved with my people in the dance of friendship. I felt so strong at that moment, so good, so clean. I cared for my people. This moment united all of us in a way that words couldn’t. (*Slash* 109)

In this passage, the ‘deep connection to the environment’ (Armstrong “Disorder”) is obvious, and the strength that indigenous people feel when being connected in such an important moment. As it turns out later, a strong link to the community is necessary to reach common goals and to fight against inequalities in society.

What is also noteworthy is the fact that for Natives land does not only mean property but is first and foremost a spiritual and cultural site, as Tommy reflects:

It's hard to show just how much our pride, our culture and our lives all have their roots in the land. It's not easy to explain that to protect and attempt to regain control over it is really the way to protect our own lives as Indian people. (*Slash* 116f)

When Tommy finally comes home, he sees his home place in a very different light. Instead of illustrating his solitude – being far from civilization – as lonely, cold and dangerous, Armstrong portrays it as a profound sensual and psychological experience for Tommy in which the protagonist encounters a deep trust in everything that happens around him:

There had been no cars for a long ways [sic]. Just the quiet snow and my tracks. I looked back and I saw that my tracks stretched far away into the white, white distance. Flakes fell into my tracks, and my tracks were soon gone. I looked ahead and the white snow stretched for miles ahead of me. I had felt the silence, alive around me. [...] I felt the feeling rise inside my head. Like a quiet explosion that spread ripples to all my body. I felt the singing music that the swirling snow danced to. I felt it take hold and I danced to the sound that swirled in white cascades around me, and covered the earth with a promise. A promise that the flowers would bloom again for my people.' (*Slash* 167)

Such a portrayal, written in lyrical language replete with repetitions, appears very idealistic and almost supernatural for the Western audience, but for Natives it captures the feeling of being one with nature: 'I knew I was home, really home, and my land welcomed me' (*Slash* 167).

In *Medicine River*, both the environment and the Native community influence Will in a way that he can finally accept his identity. Through his photographs and the accounts of his newfound friends, he gets a better picture of the community and eventually feels closer to anybody than earlier in Toronto. Will realizes that there's "[n]othing more important than family" (*Medicine* 26).

However, his concept of family differs from the Western model of the nuclear family.¹²⁶ According to Armstrong, '[t]he concept refers to blood ties within community and the instinct to protect our individual selves extended to all who share the same skin' ("Skin"). In this sense, "sharing one's skin" does not only mean being related by blood but also helping each other out and focusing on the communal rather than the individual well-being. Hence, *Medicine River* depicts a tight-knit community in

¹²⁶ See Mackie. He states that the concept of family of Native people embraces the entire community, as opposed to the Western conception of the nuclear family.

which people thoroughly know each other and are informed about the individual family trees:

Big John Yellow Rabbit was Evelyn First runner's blood nephew. Her father had married Rachael Weaselhead, which made Harley Weaselhead Big John's great-grandfather on his grandmother's side, which meant that Eddie Weaselhead, whose grandfather was Rachel's brother, was blood kin to Big John. Evelyn's sister, Doreen, had married Fred Yellow Rabbit just long enough to produce Big John before Fred went off to a rodeo in Saskatoon and disappeared. Doreen married Moses Hardy from Hobbema, who wasn't related to anyone at Standoff, but that doesn't have anything to do with the trouble. (*Medicine* 50)

A main contributor to the closeness of the Native community is the Friendship Centre and its basketball team, the "Warriors". The Friendship Centre is a place where communal activities like weddings and funerals, dances and bingo games take place. Harlen talks about the significance of the basketball team and indirectly also about the Native community as follows: "[The team] gives the boys something to belong to, something they can be proud of. [...] You give the boys confidence, Will. They got respect for you" (*Medicine* 22). By supporting the team and by taking part in several competitions, Will becomes part of a group in which he plays a significant role as a father figure for some of the boys.

The strong relation to land is illustrated by the connection to Ninastiko, the Chief Mountain: 'Ninastiko standing alone against the Rockies' (*Medicine* 20). As Harlen tells Will, "'That's how we know where we are. When we can see the mountain, we know we're home'" (*Medicine* 90). Since one cannot see Ninastiko from Toronto, Harlen frankly concludes, "'when you think you'll be moving back home?" (*Medicine* 89). Although Will lived in Toronto for the main part of his life, he is still regarded as part of the community, and the area of Medicine River still constitutes his home.

The novel ends at Christmas time, when Will has established a close relationship with Louise and his friends. There is a mood of happiness and peace in the concluding sentences, as Will walks outdoors and enjoys nature:

The day had started out overcast, but standing at the kitchen window, I could see that the winter sun was out now and lying low on Medicine River. Later that afternoon, I went for a long walk in the snow. (*Medicine* 249)

These final lines represent the new connection Will has established with his friends and family and with the world around him, anchoring himself as an individual in society and in nature and giving him a feeling of comfort and belonging.

As Mackie writes, 'Will eventually finds his vocation in life and in the process finds the sustenance and enrichment that he needs in the community of Medicine River, in the shadow of Ninastiko.'

In *Monkey Beach*, nature also does not constitute an alien place but it connotes the sense of affiliation of the protagonist and her community with a certain region. While Will realizes that he belongs to the area of the Rocky Mountains, Lisa eventually grasps that she cannot live without the ocean and the wild beaches on the Western shore of British Columbia. 'There's nothing like being on the ocean to clear the head' (*Monkey* 138) exemplifies Lisa's need of the environment for her well-being.

By depicting a protagonist with a strong relation to nature, Robinson revises the stereotype of Canada as the 'wild and empty land' ("Rethinking", n.p.), as Andrews observes. Robinson's descriptions of nature contain many details of the environment, and in doing so, the author manages to establish very realistic illustrations of nature:

A log, white with age, jutted out of the water. Balanced on top of the log was a long-legged bird staring out at the lake. [...] The bird's long thin beak pointed towards me as it rolled one yellow eye and then the other, *checking me out*. I stayed very still – the bird was almost as high as my waist and *looked cranky*. I thought it ugly [sic], but as we *watched each other*, I decided it had a *Charles Bronson-type appeal*. The back feathers looked like light blue fur, the wings and the stubby tail were smooth blue-grey, and it had a distinguished white streak on top of its head. I moved, wanting to run back to wake Mom and Mick but, startled, the bird launched itself over the lake, croaking, wings spread open, its neck bent back into a tight S. Later, when I looked it up in the library, I discovered it was a great blue heron, but while I watched it disappear in the distance I thought I was watching a pterodactyl straight from the Dinosaur Age. (*Monkey* 117f, my emphasis)

What is interesting to note here is the portrayal of animals like human beings, "looking cranky" or "watching each other". Such an animation of nature seems to be specific for the cultural background of the author since most Native people see themselves as part of

a greater environment that cannot be fully comprehended and does not necessarily have to be scientifically explained.¹²⁷

Thus, Robinson emphasizes the strong relationship between animals and humans, which becomes clear in many more passages in the novel, as the following quotes illustrate: 'A bear [...] paws at the seaweed. It raises its head, stands on its hind legs, and for a moment, [...] it looks human' (*Monkey* 316). 'The tide is wicked' (*Monkey* 140), there is a 'funnel descending from the clouds like a black finger' (*Monkey* 162) and 'ghosts of trees' (*Monkey* 206) appear. According to Appleford, '[a]nthropomorphizing [nature] makes plain the disjunction between the traditional Haisla worldview and the contemporary one' (93). To put it differently, there are different perceptions of environment, depending on the person's belief system.

To summarize, it can be said that Natives strongly identify themselves with their home place and their community. Thereby, they are 'creating the kind of cultures that [they] must become in order to survive as separate identifiable peoples with a heritage, with a culture and with traditions' (Armstrong, qtd. in Isernhagen 155).

5.3. The Significance of Storytelling

One last literary device which can be identified in all three novels and which distinguishes from Western texts is 'orality', also referred to as 'storytelling'.

Although it is commonly believed, especially by Western critics, that oral and written discourses have to be seen as separate entities,¹²⁸ Native critics and writers have come up with the contrasting view that 'writing couldn't exist without orality' because there was a 'movement from oral to written speech' (O'Neill n.p.). According to the well-known linguist Walter J. Ong, '[o]ur understanding of the differences between orality and literacy developed only in the electronic age' (2). Most Native critics, thus,

¹²⁷ See McKenzie 64f. She talks about a land-based system of 'imagizing', which means that the relationship to land is natural rather than technical, and there are certain Native traditions and customs to 'pay homage to Mother Earth'.

¹²⁸ According to Homi Bhabha, it is part of the 'Eurocentric theory to create a boundary between the oral and the written.' See Bhabha, qtd. in Eigenbrod "Not Just" 71.

see an interconnectedness of oral and written speech in a way that ‘*litera-ture* is a continuation of *ora-ture*’ (Eigenbrod “Oral” 91).¹²⁹

In First Nations literature, most authors make use of features that combine written and oral modes. This means that a Native writer ‘consciously manipulates both oral and written traditions to frame the literary space, [...] challenging [...] the] reader to move beyond the confines of the printed page’ (O’Neill n.p.). In doing so, he or she encourages ‘the readers and critics alike to reconsider the traditional opposition of orality and literacy as mutually exclusive terms of both textual and cultural signification’ (Dickinson 320).

As Gilbert argues, ‘orality is practice and a knowledge, a strategic device potentially present in recuperating indigenous voices, potentially effective in describing empire’ (Gilbert 101). Hence, it can be said that the application of oral features enables Native authors to perform a postcolonial act of working against stereotypical assumptions and instead to establish a form of discourse that is more authentic and more appropriate to their own cultural tradition.

According to Dickinson, Native writers undergo a ‘process of transcribing a storytelling event into a written text’ (320). Hence, one difficulty lies in the fact that the ‘communal experience of telling a story needs to be adapted to the isolation of a writer’s work [...] and] transformed into a linear process’ (Eigenbrod “Oral” 92). This implies that storytelling is usually a communal event; in other words, a form of interaction between storyteller and audience¹³⁰, which needs to be adapted in written speech by means of literary devices that create orality.

In her article “Not Just a Text: “Indigenizing” the Study of Indigenous Literatures”, Eigenbrod identifies several features that contribute to an oral style in writing. First and foremost, orality is achieved by informal and short sentence structures that are used in conventional conversations. In addition, repetitions, exclamations, and

¹²⁹ Dickinson discusses the argument that there is no dichotomy but rather a continuity between oral and written speech in great detail. He states that orality has to be seen as a feature ‘*in* literacy rather than orality *and/or* literacy’. See Dickinson 321. Furthermore, Emberley speaks for recognition of orality as a component of a more heterogeneous concept of writing. See Emberley 144.

¹³⁰ See Eigenbrod “Oral” 98 or Dickinson 327. Both argue that storytelling cannot happen without an audience and see it as polyphonic and polyvalent.

demonstrative pronouns are applied to verbalize body language and hence to create the illusion of oral speech of the characters. The following passage exemplifies this fact:

After he started the motor, he raised one hand and flapped it a few times at Mom, then saluted and yelled, "Red Power!" [...]
 I stood up and waved back wildly.
 "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.
 "Who?" He looked back at the shoreline.
 "They're right there," I said, pointing. "On the beach."
 Mick craned his head and squinted. "I don't see anyone." (*Monkey* 91f)

Such an unmediated representation of direct speech, reinforced by gestures and demonstrative pronouns, creates the effect of oral narration.

However, the authors do not only imitate oral narration but they also initiate the engagement of the audience and make them part of the story through the transformation of storytelling events into narratives. According to Eigenbrod, 'the reader of these stories will be drawn into the mind set of an orally-based thought process' ("Oral" 93). Armstrong agrees with this statement when she remarks that oratory 'is delivered with an intent towards audience. Its format is created with intention to develop the [readers'] thinking in a certain manner, and to inspire the thinking to create and solicit certain kinds of responses' (qtd. in Anderson 55).

The involvement of the audience is triggered when Armstrong directly addresses the readers and urges them to reflect on what is happening, as the following statement of Tommy exemplifies: 'I'll tell you it was something, that caravan' (*Slash* 71). Furthermore, it is achieved by detached narrators who 'are intensely introspective in their attempt to make sense of what is happening around them' (William 124). This means that particularly Will as a protagonist depicts events 'as though aware that other people are watching the story through his eyes and wouldn't know the information he knows without his speaking of it in his internal voice' (William 124).

Due the engagement of the readers, which is intended to educate the audience, many literary critics have argued that 'oratory is always about political perspective' (Anderson 55). The authors object to Western definitions of what constitutes a Native literary tradition by expanding the notion of what written literature is like, and hence 'create a form specific to, rather than essential aspect of, Native writing' (Emberley 142).

In the novels, oral storytelling techniques are also achieved by the insertion of ‘mini-stories’ (137), as Emberley labels them. For instance, Tommy reflects on earlier times when they were picking apples in Washington to earn some money for the family and eventually were able to buy a tractor (*Slash* 11f), which again illustrates the sense of collectivity and communal property.

In *Monkey Beach*, Robinson does not only insert stories from everyday life, but mainly stories which have been passed on from generation to generation and hence carry cultural-specific meaning. For instance, Ma-ma-oo tells Lisa a story about Stone Man, ‘once a young hunter with a big attitude’ (*Monkey* 113) who was turned into stone by a cloud because he did not listen to the elders warning him not to go up the mountains. This story is clearly an example of the use of stories for didactic purposes through symbolic figures. In addition, Ma-ma-oo declares that ‘to really understand the old stories [...] you had to speak Haisla’ (*Monkey* 211). Here, the author comments on the misunderstandings and misinterpretations of Native cultures, and she portrays Natives as insiders; a position that is not attainable for non-Native readers.

Robinson also inserts stories from her Haisla background which she, however, alters to make them fit into modern society. For instance, she includes the story about Weegit the raven, a trickster figure, who is portrayed like a human as he ‘sips his low-fat mocha as he reads yet another sanitized version of his earlier exploits’ (*Monkey* 295f). Likewise, Lionel James, a character in *Slash*, transforms a story about Coyote according to a contemporary context: “‘Raven saw Coyote, and she flew down, and sat on a limb near where Coyote was trying to go to sleep, and she said, ‘You can’t sleep here unless you have a credit card’” (*Medicine* 165).

By the inclusion of such stories, the authors point out that there is ‘no distinction between past and present, history and story’ (Eigenbrod “Oral” 93) according to a Native belief system that ‘history *is* story’ (Anderson 57, emphasis by Anderson). It is often stated that Natives perceive tradition adaptable. Nevertheless, traditions are adapted according to the changing circumstances in society, which is essential for the survival as a cultural group. According to Gail Valaskakis, reviving cultural traditions is ‘not a case of retrieving recollections; it is a process of transforming memory’ (245). This ‘interest in relearning and rediscovering [...] is a necessary step in the struggle to regain the historical consciousness that is essential for establishing ethnic identity’ (Karrer and Lutz 34f).

In *Monkey Beach*, there are also comments on the different conceptions of stories. While Ma-ma-oo takes stories on TV as real and truthful as the old stories she tells Lisa, Lisa's father offers different version of the same event because he reckons, "It's just a story" (*Monkey* 8). For him, retelling means alteration in order to make the occasion more enthralling and fascinating for his children: 'Dad puts sound effects in his stories but Ma-ma-oo says you shouldn't put them in just to make it exciting' (*Monkey* 54).

Similar to the other novels, King's narrative is largely composed of dialogues, which facilitates that storyteller and audience take part in oral storytelling performances. According to Andrews and Walton, King was influenced by the Okanagan elder Harry Robinson, 'whose narratives create an "oral syntax" which "encourages readers to read the stories out loud"' (Andrews and Walton, n.p.), as the following quote illustrates:

"Johnnnnnnnnnnnieeeeeee!"

"Geooooooooooooorggeeeee!"

"Frrrrrrrrrrrrred!" (*Medicine* 199)

Such exclamations exemplify that Native literature 'suggests performative story-telling, the "oral" lightly assumed in the "written"' (Lee 462).

The author also inserts episodes of Will's childhood when his mother 'would get in a story-telling mood' (*Medicine* 119). Once again, the author uses stories to reflect on the past and at the same time to compare it with events happening in the present, which constitutes a comment on the relatedness of (hi)story.

To sum up, it can be said that First Nations literature is 'blending together the individual and the communal, the commonplace and the spiritual, [...] thus reflecting a circular rather than a linear way of thinking' (Eigenbrod "Oral" 98f). As already mentioned, this refers to the fact that the plot as well as the character developments of the protagonists are cyclic rather than linear.

Beth Cuthand, a Cree poet, explains the position of Native authors as follows:

We come from a tradition of storytelling, and as storytellers we have a responsibility to be honest, to transmit our understanding of the world to other people [...]. In this process, there is something more than information being transmitted: there's energy, there's strength being transmitted from the storyteller to the listener and that is what's important in teaching young people about their identity. What we're doing as Indian writers is taking that tradition

and putting it physically onto paper and getting a broader distribution of those stories, because it's really important for us, in terms of our continuing existence, that we transmit our identity and strength from one generation to another. (qtd. in Dickinson 329)

Orality may thus be seen as a characteristic of First Nations literature due to the fact that Native writers have a broader and more inclusive conception of literature, which stems from a long-lasting oral heritage. They aim at an inclusion of the readers, who need to listen and respond to the texts in order to contribute to a communal storytelling experience. As Jordan Wheeler aptly states, 'The right to speak must be fought for. The right to be heard relies on people who want to listen' (qtd. in Dickinson 332).

6. Conclusion

In their novels, the First Nations authors Armstrong, King and Robinson tackle issues such as political activism, racism and stereotyping, the difficulty of bridging identities, the relation to nature and community, the importance of storytelling, and the revitalization of cultural traditions, which have been important topics for indigenous peoples of Canada for many decades. Although these works of fiction were written in different periods, ranging from the still politically active era of the 1980s to the more creative and innovative phase of the early 21st century, the novels share certain characteristics, which can be traced back to a related cultural and historic background and a similar belief system.

With their writings, the authors provide a realistic representation of what contemporary life means for indigenous peoples, alongside a vision of what can be achieved in the future. By doing so, they try to reclaim identity for Native peoples, which is important for their survival as distinct cultural groups. As Ruffo states, '[b]eginning in the oral tradition, words and stories have always meant power in Native culture, and it is through this sacred power that Native people have always expressed their sense of identity and place on the land' ("Inside" 174).

By deliberately deconstructing common beliefs about First Nations in Canada, political activism is at the very core of their texts. To put it another way, indigenous novels are essentially political because they express realities that challenge Western ideas. According to Peters, to reclaim ethnic identity

demands a negotiation between dominant stereotypes imposed upon Indian peoples and the self-definitions those peoples struggle to articulate within the parameters of the dominant culture. [... In doing so, Native authors] create their stories with a new sense of survivance. (66)

The difficulty of survival runs through the works of the three authors, depicting the material conditions as well as the social inequalities that indigenous people encounter in daily life. They link the issue of the survival of indigenous individuals to the strength of the ties to Native traditions, because only through strong connections to their communities can the protagonists carry on.

As a result, the novels provoke the readers to reflect on the hardships and brutalities that Native peoples still face in contemporary Canada and invite the Native readership to continue the fight for recognition and equality in their own lives. Hence,

the expected healing aimed at in the novels proceeds in three ways: Firstly, the act of writing is liberating and healing in itself, since it helps the authors to recover from the violence and racism they have experienced; secondly, the protagonists undergo a process of healing by coming home and finding their identity in relation with their community and surroundings; and thirdly, the attentive readers experience liberation and healing in their own lives through reflection and identification with the main characters.

By including open endings, the novels create future visions in a realistic manner, portraying all the loose ends that are still to be brought together. Most critics speak of a bright future for First Nations authors because with their creative, new approaches they will ensure that their voices will be heard by Native and non-Native readers/critics alike, and therefore will contribute to the collective process of healing. According to Armstrong,

we [Native writers] can also contribute to healing the overall unwellness in Canadian society by presenting some of these constructs as alternative paradigms. (“Life-writing” 41)

When it comes to the analysis of First Nations literature, one has to be aware that there are certain features that distinguish the novels from other, Western works of fiction. However, First Nations literature must not be restricted to those characteristics because this would be yet another form of colonization. As Herb Wylie stresses, it is ‘important to ensure that cross-cultural reading doesn’t slide into recolonization’ (122). Hence, it is vital that First Nations writers are able to bring in their own perspectives about analyzing and criticizing Native novels. As Thomas King states in an interview, ‘I’d like to think that a Native-based process could happen but I don’t know who’s going to do it’ (qtd. in Andrews “Trickery” 185). Kateri Damm underscores the need for new theoretical strategies in the criticism of Aboriginal literatures as follows,

By freeing ourselves of the constricting bounds of stereotypes and imposed labels of identity, we empower ourselves and our communities and break free of the yoke of colonial power that has not only controlled what we do and where we live but who we are. In this way, Indigenous literatures will shape themselves on their own terms. (24)

Such an assertion implies that there is a great need for further research on terminology and literary theories that derive from indigenous authors and critics themselves. Only then can a just and open-minded analysis of First Nations literature be ensured.

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Appendix

Biography: Jeannette Armstrong

Jeannette Armstrong was born in 1948 in Okanagan, BC. She grew up at the Penticton Indian Reserve, where she received a traditional education from Okanagan elders and her family, and also raised her two children there.

A multitalented artist, Armstrong has created both literature and art. Her literary production increased soon after her graduation of the University of Victoria in 1978. She published works in different genres, i.e. children's books like *Enwhisteetkwa (Walk in Water)* and *Neekna and Chemai*, short stories like "This is a Story", poetry (which was collected i.e. in *Breath Tracks*), and fiction. Her most famous novel, *Slash*, was published in 1985 for an Okanagan curriculum project after two years of research. Her second novel, *Whispering in Shadows*, was published in 2000 and can be regarded as a blending of fiction, poetry and art. In addition to her creative production, Armstrong composed a wealth of critical works such as *The Native Creative Process*, and "Land Speaking," which deals with the influence of land/nature on her language and her traditions.

Armstrong, who sees herself as a bridge between Native and non-Native societies, was a main contributor to the foundation of the En'owkin Learning Institute Centre, Theytus Books publishing house, and the En'owkin International School of Writing. She committed herself to the advancement of literature and the arts among First Nations peoples. In recognition of her work as an educator, community leader and Indigenous rights activist, Armstrong received many awards, i.e. the Mungo Martin Award in 1974, the Helen Pitt Memorial Award in 1978 and an Honorary Doctorate in Letters by St. Thomas University in New Brunswick in 2000.

Plot Summary: *Slash*

Slash depicts the journey of Tommy/Slash Kelasket, a young Okanagan man who grows up at a reserve in British Columbia and, because of the racism he encounters in school as well as the split that is noticeable in his own society, leaves home to find his true identity as an “Indian”. In the course of this quest, Tommy (as well as the reader) learns about the political and social struggles of indigenous North Americans during the 1960s and 1970s.

His search is a long struggle through ‘modern’ and ‘traditional’ society, and his political activism leads him to prison, many debates and conferences as well as spiritual gatherings and traditional feasts. More than once, Slash experiences the physical and cultural symptoms of colonial violence.

Before Slash is ready to return to his relations for good and to form his own family with Maeg, he makes many mistakes and wanders about, not knowing what is missing or even what he is looking for. Eventually, he comes to terms with his own past and the traditional education he has encountered at a young age, and thus he is able to reconcile his experiences, including racism, drug and alcohol addictions and the seemingly senseless loss of friends and loved ones.

In the end, Tommy becomes a role model, not only for his son Marlon, but for many other young Natives who are lost in their in-between position among divergent cultures.

Biography: Thomas King

The author Thomas King was born on 24 April 1943 in Sacramento as a son of a Cherokee father and a mother of Greek and German descent. After his high school education in California he travelled abroad and got interested in photojournalism in Australia, before he returned to the United States and finished his master's degree in 1972. He received his PhD in English literature at the University of Utah.

Since then, Thomas King has been employed in academic institutions in both the USA and Canada. He worked for several years at the University of Minnesota as Head of their American Indian Studies program, was employed as a professor of Native Studies at the University of Lethbridge for ten years and taught Native literature and Creative Writing at the University of Guelph. He finally acquired Canadian citizenship and has spent much of his adult life there.

His wide range of literary production stretches from children's stories, short stories, poems and novels to articles and literary criticism. Thereby, he aims to address and portray issues of justice and equality of indigenous peoples in North America. His first novel, *Medicine River*, appeared in 1989 and was given the PEN/Josephine Miles Award. It was later adapted for television. In 1990, he issued the first anthology of Native American literature, *All My Relations*, and published his first short story collection, *One Good Story, That One*, in 1993. His other novels, i.e. *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993) and *Truth and Bright Water* (1999), were also very successful and hence awarded several nominations and prizes. Furthermore, King writes scripts for TV and film and recently started to broadcast a weekly popular serial for CBC Radio called *The Dead Dog Comedy Hour*. In 2007, King made his directorial debut with *I'm Not The Indian You Had In Mind*, a short film for which he was also the screenwriter.

Thomas King is also politically active and can be seen as an advocate for First Nations causes. For his special achievements, he was made a Member of the Order of Canada in 2004. In 2007 he declared to be seeking the New Democratic Party (NDP) nomination for Guelph, Ontario, in the upcoming federal election, and was acclaimed as a NDP candidate, however, he was not very successful in the polls.

Plot Summary: *Medicine River*

The novel offers a series of episodes in the life of Will, a half-Blackfoot, half-non-Native man, who grew up in a reserve near a small town named Medicine River in Alberta. His basically absent father was a bull-rider in Calgary, which is why Will and his brother James were raised by their mother. These childhood memories are revealed through flashbacks when Will returns to his reserve to attend their mother's funeral.

Will is determined to follow his career as a photographer in Toronto, where he has an affair and shares accommodation with a married woman named Susan. However, Harlen Bigbear manages to persuade him to stay and open a photographer's shop in Medicine River. He is a witty and humorous man, who soon becomes Will's closest friend and adviser.

At the reserve, Will meets Louise and becomes involved in an unfulfilled love affair that characterizes Will's existence: a series of half-fulfilled prospects and opportunities. Although he develops a relationship with Louise and her daughter, Southwing, for whom Will becomes a father-figure, he does not manage to share his feelings with her, and his wish to share a life is not realized. As a member of the local basketball team, "The Warriors", he has some success when an ex-convict joins the team and helps them to win the tournament; however, they soon become weak again when Clyde is sent back to jail.

In numerous episodes about life at the reserve, the conflicts between traditional and modern life styles and the problems of drugs and alcohol are revealed in a gentle and often comical narrative.

Biography: Eden Robinson

Eden Robinson was born on 19 January 1968, as Vicki Lena Robinson at Haisla Nation Kitamaat Reserve, BC. She has Haisla and Heiltsuk ancestors. After graduating from the University of Victoria (UVic) and the University of British Columbia in Vancouver (UBC), she spent years travelling and living in urban areas, before she returned to Kitamaat region in 2003. Eden Robinson is the very first Haisla novelist.

Influenced by Stephen King and Edgar Allen Poe, Robinson is well known for her dark, gothic fiction. *Traplines* (1996) is a collection of short stories and a novella, for which she was awarded the Winifred Holtby Prize and the *Prism* International Prize for Short Fiction and was much read in Canada, the United States, Britain and Germany. In 2000, Robinson published her first novel, *Monkey Beach*, which became a Finalist for the Giller Prize and won the Ethel Wilson Fiction Prize. Her latest novel, *Blood Sports* (2006) draws on some of the characters and events of *Traplines*, and can be seen as a journey to the most evil impulses of humankind. Robinson received the UVic Distinguished Alumni Award for *Blood Sports*.

Robinson was one of the first Native female Canadian writers who achieved international success and hence serves as a role model for other Native writers. She was a Writer-in-Residence at the Whitehorse Public Library. Robinson is said to be amongst the finest contemporary First Nations authors, describing Native traditions and modern realities with piercing black humor. Furthermore, Robinson has used her status as a prominent person to draw attention to the Canadian government's poor progress concerning Native health care and the shortage of subsidized housing for urban Natives.

Plot Summary: *Monkey Beach*

This multilayered novel deals with the tragic disappearance of seventeen-year-old Jimmy, a handsome young man and brilliant swimmer, apparently after a boat accident off the shore of Vancouver Island, BC. His older sister, Lisa Marie, who has the sacred gift of seeing spirits, goes to look for him at Monkey Beach after having another vision about his death. This particular shore is a haunted place where people go to look for the elusive sasquatch (or b'gwus), a huge, manlike animal.

The story of Lisa's quest to discover Jimmy's fate is intertwined with her childhood memories, growing up in a Haisla village on the West Coast of British Columbia as well as the experiences she has as a teenager in Vancouver, where she gets obsessed with drugs and alcohol to cope with her uncle Mick's death. One of the major influences on her is her grandmother Ma-ma-oo, who teaches Lisa about Haisla culture (songs, practices of daily life, ceremonies, and Haisla language) and ways to communicate with the spiritual world. Her uncle Mick, who was a political activist and member of the AIM movement, triggers her interest in politics and shows her how to be proud of her heritage and to live as free-spirited as possible. Both her parents, however, disapprove of traditional cultural practices and try to protect her from everything that has to do with the spiritual world. Lisa herself is caught in-between traditional, Native customs and life in modern Canadian society.

Eventually, Lisa arrives at Monkey Beach and has yet another spiritual encounter ...

Summary (in German)

Kanada war schon immer ein multiethnisches und multikulturelles Land, doch erst seit den 1960er Jahren gibt es Gesetze, die sowohl die Zweisprachigkeit (*Official Languages Act*, 1969) als auch den Multikulturalismus des Landes (*Canadian Multiculturalism Act*, 1985) anerkennen.

Obwohl die literarische Produktion indigener Autoren bereits im 19. Jahrhundert begann und von mündlichen Überlieferungen beeinflusst wurde, so hat die rechtliche Anerkennung der Vielfalt ethnischen Gruppierungen in Kanada zu einer Zunahme an First Nations Literatur geführt. Indigene Autoren erkannten die Möglichkeit, durch ihre Literatur den stereotypen Bildern und klischeehaften Beschreibungen von weißen Autoren entgegenzuwirken und stattdessen Sachverhalte aus einer eigenen, indigenen Perspektive darzustellen. Entstanden sind zunächst realistische Beschreibungen der alltäglichen Schwierigkeiten von indigenen Menschen in einer modernen Gesellschaft, welche sich hin zu kreativen und originellen Werken zu Beginn des 21. Jahrhunderts entwickelten.

Die Bücher indigener Autoren zielen darauf ab, Brücken zwischen den verschiedenen Kulturen Kanadas zu bauen und ein kulturelles Verständnis zu fördern sowie die indigene Leserschaft zu bestärken und ihnen Strategien aufzuzeigen, wie ein traditionelles Leben in einer modernen Gesellschaft möglich ist ohne die eigene Identität aufzugeben.

Für meine Analyse von First Nations Literatur habe ich drei Bücher gewählt, die stilistisch sehr divergent sind und zu unterschiedlichen Zeitpunkten publiziert wurden. *Slash* wurde von Jeannette Armstrong im Jahr 1985 veröffentlicht und beschreibt in oftmals aggressivem und hitzigen Ton die „Red Power“ Bewegung in Kanada und den Vereinigten Staaten aus der Sicht eines männlichen Protagonisten. Thomas Kings Roman *Medicine River* (1989) schildert den Alltag eines indigenen Fotografen, der nach dem Tod seiner Mutter an den Rand seines Heimatreservats zurückkehrt und dort langsam zu einem wichtigen Teil der indigenen Gesellschaft wird. In *Monkey Beach* (2000) berichtet die Autorin Eden Robinson vom Leben eines indigenen Mädchens, das die Fähigkeit besitzt, mit den Geistern ihrer Vorfahren zu kommunizieren und Ereignisse vorherzusehen. Mit deren Hilfe erfährt sie Elemente ihrer Kultur und lernt durch ihre Großmutter, die kulturellen Traditionen weiterzuführen.

In meiner Arbeit lässt sich feststellen, dass die drei Romane sehr unterschiedlich sind in ihrer Struktur und den stilistischen Elementen, dass andererseits aber auch Parallelen in den Thematiken aufgezeigt werden können. Ich beleuchte in meiner Analyse der Bücher, dass dies Themen sind, die häufig in der Literatur der First Nations zu finden sind; unter anderem die Abhandlung von politischen Ereignissen (vor allem die Politik der aktiven Phase des „Red Power“ Bewegungen in den 1960er und 1970er Jahren) sowie die Suche des Protagonisten nach der eigenen Identität, welche sich üblicherweise in Verbindung mit der indigenen Gemeinschaft und dem Heimatort vollzieht.

Nach einem generellen Abriss des sozio-historischen und literarischen Hintergrunds der First Nations zeige ich die Gattungen, Strukturen und stilistischen Eigenheiten der ausgewählten Werke auf.

Danach erfolgt eine Abhandlung der politischen Aspekte in den literarischen Werken: zum einen, wie das Erzählen für die Autoren selbst einen politischen Akt darstellt, weil dadurch die Möglichkeit besteht, gegen Stereotypen anzukämpfen, und zum anderen, welche politischen Ereignisse und Vorkommnisse durch die Anwendung von Symbolik, intertextuellen Verweisen, Reflexion und direkter Erzählung in den Büchern aufscheinen.

Zum Schluss beschäftige ich mit dem Aspekt der individuellen und gemeinschaftlichen Suche nach der Identität, genauer gesagt wie die Protagonisten mit Hilfe ihres gesellschaftlichen Umfelds von der Abkehr der traditionellen Lebensweise zur Anerkennung ihres kulturellen Erbes gelangen und dadurch ihren Platz in der indigenen Gesellschaft finden.

Curriculum Vitae

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Wissenschaftlicher Werdegang

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 2003 – 2004 Foothill College, USA — Jazz Dance und Englisch
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