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# Back to Nature?
# Conservatism and First Nations Cultural Ecologies

**Zusammenfassung**

*Bei der dOCUMENTA 2012 in Kassel wurden erstmals posthum sieben Gemälde von Emily Carr ausgestellt, die unter anderem einige in pittoreske Waldszenen eingebettete Totempfähle zeigten. Während diese Bilder indigener Landschaften durchaus experimentell, aussagekräftig und sogar subversiv sind, wohnt ihnen ebenso ein hartnäckiges Klischee inne: dass Nordamerikas Ureinwohner/innen in Harmonie mit der Natur leben und stets um deren Gleichgewicht bemüht ihre Ressourcen weise erhalten. Im Gegensatz zum populären 'Öko-Indianer' soll es im folgenden Aufsatz um ein Modell kultureller Ökologie der First Nations gehen, das sich nicht auf reduktive Dichotomien beschränkt. Anhand zweier Romane von Velma Wallis (Gwich'in Athabascan) und Eden Robinson (Haisla/Heiltsuk) werden die Strategien beleuchtet, mit denen indigen-kanadische Schriftsteller/innen die Landschaft des Nordwestens in politische Handlungsfähigkeit übersetzen. In Anlehnung an Joni Adamsons Forderung nach einem integrativen und multikulturellen Umweltbewusstsein möchte dieser Ansatz schließlich nicht nur alternative Wissenssysteme in First Nations-Literaturen aufdecken, sondern auch die theoretischen und methodologischen Grenzen des Ecocriticism erweitern.*

**Abstract**

*In Kassel in 2012, the* dOCUMENTA 13 *exhibition featured seven landscape paintings by British Columbia artist Emily Carr, many of which depict First Nations totem poles in picturesque forest scenes. While these images of Native landscapes are experimental, powerful, and even subversive, they also uneasily ring with a tenacious cliché: that North America's indigenous people live in harmony with nature, balancing out their biospheres to wisely conserve their resources. In contrast to this popular image, this paper will sketch a First Nations cultural ecology beyond limiting dualisms. Inquiring into the close relationships between space and subjectivity, I will use examples by Velma Wallis (Gwich'in Athabascan) and Eden Robinson (Haisla/Heiltsuk) in order to trace the ways in which Northwestern Landscapes are translated into agency by First Nations writers. Taking up Joni Adamson's cue that we need to develop "a more inclusive environmentalism and a more multicultural ecocriticism," my approach seeks to not only illuminate alternative systems of knowledge in First Nations literature but also to expand the theoretical and methodological frameworks of ecocriticism.*

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**Résumé**

*Lors de la «dOCUMENTA (13)» de l'année 2012 à Kassel, on a exposé pour la première fois à titre posthume sept peintures de l'artiste Emily Carr sur lesquelles figurent entre autres des mâts totémiques insérés dans de pittoresques scènes forestières. Tandis que ces tableaux de paysages indigènes possèdent d'un côté un caractère expérimental, fort et même subversif, ils représentent de l'autre un cliché persévérant : celui des aborigènes de l'Amérique du Nord qui vivent en harmonie avec la nature, toujours préoccupés à conserver sagement ses ressources et son équilibre. Cet article, au contraire, esquissera un modèle d'écologie culturelle des Premières Nations au-delà d'une simplification binaire. A l'aide d'exemples littéraires – de Velma Wallis (Gwich'in Athabascan) et d'Eden Robinson (Haisla/Heiltsuk) – l'étude se concentrera sur les relations entre espace et subjectivité pour découvrir les stratégies dont se servent certains écrivains autochtones pour traduire «terre» en capacité politique. En me basant sur l'exigence de Joni Adamson selon laquelle nous avons besoin de développer une une conscience écologique plus inclusive et multiculturelle, mon point de départ essaie non seulement de découvrir des systèmes de savoir alternatifs dans la littérature des Premières nations, mais aussi d'élargir les limites théoriques et méthodologiques de l'«ecocriticism».*

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## 1. "The Indian and Brave": Emily Carr's Northwestern Landscapes

In Kassel in 2012, the *dOCUMENTA 13* exhibition – one of the world's prime sites for exhibiting contemporary art – hosted an unexpected guest: among the 300 mostly contemporary artists was also one who had worked in the early twentieth century. Seven paintings by Emily Carr (1871-1945), the famous "Canadian icon," as the *Canadian Encyclopedia* dubs her (Shadbolt 2012), were presented at the New Gallery (Neue Galerie), showing picturesque British Columbia landscapes and forest scenes. These landscapes feature First Nations totem poles – often abandoned and rotting away (as in *Vanquished,* 1930), or distinct indigenous imagery (as *The Raven,* 1928-29). These representations of Native Northwestern landscapes are experimental and powerful, undoubtedly demonstrating the exceptional talent and "originality of mind" (Tippett n.pag.) that Carr's biographers celebrate her for (cf. also Blanchard 9-12). At the same time, however, the paintings are defined by a conspicuous absence: the owners of both the land and its cultural markers are nowhere to be seen (see, for instance, *Forest, British Columbia,* 1932). With very few exceptions, Emily Carr did not paint First Nations people. This omission is much in line with a common stereotype of the time: the notion of what Edward S. Curtis called "The Vanishing Race". Indeed, as Douglas Cole reminds us, the "Northwest Coast population may have declined by 80 percent in the first century of contact" (150), and these statistics prompted anthropologists and artists from Franz Boas to Curtis him-

self to try and collect as much of Native culture as possible for future generations. Carr thus followed a common paradigm of salvage anthropology: when she began encountering First Nations culture in 1907, she decided that "she would track down as many totem poles as possible in their original settings" (Klerks 58).[1] Semantically, therefore, her paintings are not only consistently void of indigenous presences – in *Big Raven* (1931), for instance, the mythical bird stands motionless above a rolling landscape like a relic from a long lost past – but they are conservative in a literal and environmentalist sense. In their displacement of indigenous ownership, sovereignty, and "survivance" (Vizenor 37),[2] Emily Carr's paintings are clearly characterized by the longing for a pure, uncontaminated nature as a holistic shelter for humankind – a common modernist reflex against what Georg Lukács has famously termed "transcendental homelessness." "Under the cedars," she writes in her journal in September 1933, "you sense the Indian and brave, fine spiritual things" (1966, 56). This quote tellingly merges the natural setting of the woods with a nostalgia for mystical guidance – both of which are associated with the "Indian."[3] This is illustrated by paintings such as *Totem and Forest* (1931), in which, as art historian Doris Shadbolt diagnoses, Carr "uses the forest background in such a way as to suggest, metaphorically, its underlying relationship to the Indian's art" (1979, 74). "The exceptionally narrow vertical format," Shadbolt continues "echoes the tree trunk form and suggests the confinement of dense woods. Compositionally it is then divided into three additional totem-like vertical strips: two of forest, the third the pole itself" (1979, 76).

Such projections of holistic harmony continue to resound throughout twentieth-century Western culture. From the performances of fake 'Apache' Grey Owl to James

1 "The Indian people and their Art touched me deeply," Carr writes in her autobiography: "Perhaps that was what had given my sketch the 'Indian flavour.' By the time I reached home my mind was made up. I was going to picture totem poles in their own village settings, as complete a collection of them as I could" (1946, 211).

2 In his famous concept of "survivance," Vizenor implies "more than survival, more than endurance or mere response; the stories of survivance are an active presence" (15). The term has also been read as a blend between survival and resistance.

3 Emily Carr's relationship to indigenous people continues to be a controversial issue. Carmen Birkle has convincingly argued that, even though "Carr participated in the 'salvage paradigm' […], the totem poles, however, were not a commodity for her but a respectfully treated medium of self-exploration and a way toward psychological and spiritual enlightenment" (43). Gerta Moray also gives a comprehensive and detailed overview of the various kinds of relationships between the painter and her subjects in *Unsettling Encounters* (2006). Yet, whereas Douglas Cole, for instance, defends her on the basis of her writing, especially in *Klee Wyck* (cf. Cole 152-62), Starleigh Grass, a Tsilhqot'in teacher and blogger, is rather critical of her because "she witnessed the impacts of genocide first hand, and rather than doing or saying anything, she pulled out a paintbrush and made a career out of it." Indeed, while her depictions of her "friend" Sophie Frank (1946, 228), for instance, a Haida woman who lost all of her twenty-one children, seem compassionate in *Klee Wyck* (1941, 55-65), she writes about infant mortality rather apathetically in her autobiography: "Indian babies were temporary creatures: behavior half-white, half-Indian, was perplexing to them. Their dull, brown eyes grew vague, vaguer – gave up – a cradle was empty – there was one more shaggy little grave in the cemetery" (1946, 229).

Cameron's film *Avatar,* popular reverberations of indigeneity repeat the tenacious cliché of the noble eco-Indian: of people conserving their resources and values, whose identity is reduced to an instinctual practice of eco-spiritual harmony, which is coded as desirable but outdated. Such representations, I will argue, use the past as their defining feature; displacing, with nostalgic brush strokes, the underlying power structures of colonization. Carr's weather-worn totems next to burial grounds and gravestones (as in *Alert Bay Burial Ground*) are not only culturally unfit for the technological twentieth and twenty-first centuries, but they literally point away from issues such as social conflicts, cultural diversity, political sovereignty, and future-oriented agency.

In the following, therefore, I will first revise, in more detail, the interfaces between First Nations cultures and ecological discourse, and then outline a theoretical and methodological framework that may help us to approach these interfaces in a more differentiated way. By highlighting two contemporary approaches to Northwestern landscapes by First Nations writers, Velma Wallis's *Two Old Women* (1993) and Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach* (2000), I will trace the ways in which 'land' and 'nature' are translated into agency rather than discourses of disappearance. Taking up Joni Adamson's cue that we need to develop "a more inclusive environmentalism and a more multicultural ecocriticism" (2001, xix),[4] my approach seeks to not only illuminate First Nations cultural ecologies as alternative systems of knowledge but also to expand the theoretical and methodological frameworks of ecocriticism.

## 2. First Nations Cultural Ecologies

Most indigenous North American cultures emphasize the interrelatedness of all beings and thus emblematize what Timothy Morton terms "the ecological thought" – the ability "to join the dots and see that everything is interconnected" (2010, 1). "The people and the land are inseparable," Leslie Marmon Silko states about traditional Laguna cosmology: "In the old days there had been […] mutual respect for the land […]. This respect extended to all living beings, especially to the plants and animals" (85). Or, from a more practical perspective, Oscar Kawagley writes that "Alaska Native peoples have traditionally tried to live in harmony with the world

4 Joni Adamson's is one of the few systematic ecocritical approaches to Native North American literatures: Even though the practice of ecocriticism has developed vibrantly and dynamically since the 1970s, research at the intersections between indigenous studies and the environment has been less productive. Even though Lawrence Buell and others before him do refer to indigenous American texts, Adamson was the first to systematically "theorize a way of reading that provides us with the tools we need for building a more satisfying multicultural ecocriticism and a more inclusive, multicultural environmentalism that can be united with other social movements to create a more liveable world for humans and nonhumans alike" (Adamson 2001, 185). In a study on *Ecocriticism: Creating Self and Place in Environmental and American Indian Literatures* (2002), Donelle Dreese focuses even more closely on the precise interconnections between Self and Place by examining Native American poetry and prose, yet her book is of limited scope and thus marks but a first stepping stone toward further research.

around them. This has required the construction of an intricate subsistence-based worldview, a complex way of life with specific cultural mandates regarding the ways in which the human being is to relate to other human relatives and the natural and spiritual worlds" (226). This concept, however, has been widely distorted by Western mainstream culture, appropriated into holistic clichés of people instinctively harmonious with their environment, yet unable to meet the challenges of technology and civilization. "Time and again," Shepard Krech writes in a seminal study, "the dominant image is of the Indian in nature who understands the systemic consequences of his actions, feels deep sympathy with all living forms, and takes steps to conserve so that the earth's harmonies are never imbalanced and resources never in doubt" (21). This stereotype fits perfectly into the colonial depiction of the American continent as an Edenic "wilderness." Through the lens of the European invasion, the image of the earth-loving, static, and primitive Native has been transformed into a powerful framework of dispossession and displacement. This discourse not only effectively glosses over political issues of sovereignty and cultural representation, but it is diametrically opposed to two specific facts that have only recently gained visibility in the critical arena.

For one, North America's indigenous people had substantially impacted and changed the eco-systems of their continent long before Europeans arrived. "By 1492," William Denevan writes, "Indian activity had modified vegetation and wildlife, caused erosion, and created earthworks, roads, and settlements throughout the Americas" (Denevan 18). Especially on the Prairies, the systematic and regular burning of wood for purposes of hunting, crop management, or warfare resulted in the transformation of the entire landscape, turning wide areas of forest into grassland (Williams, see also Botkin). Furthermore, as Shepard Krech writes about Native American sustainability, "their demands for wood, water, and other basic resources were evidently at times too great to sustain" (212). For another, as Ursula Heise reminds us, recent scientific studies in ecology substantially challenge the conventional notions of 'harmony' and systemic stability in nature as such: contemporary research – e.g., by Daniel Botkin – much rather presents "a more complex image of ecosystems as dynamic, perpetually changing, and often far from stable or balanced" (Heise 2006, 510).

Instead of reducing First Nations ecology to romantic dichotomies, therefore – which easily associate indigenous people with "nature" and the colonial settlers with "culture" – the concept of "cultural ecology" – as developed by critics Gregory Bateson, William Paulson, and Hubert Zapf – promises to be more useful in re-examining the patterns of human culture and its environment in a Native context. Whereas the first, ethnology-based definitions of cultural ecology, developed by Julian Steward in the 1950s, focused on "ascertaining how the adaptation of a culture to its environment may entail certain changes" and on "determin[ing] whether similar adjustments occur in similar environments" (Steward 1955, 9; see also Frake), more recent approaches have come to understand culture itself as an eco-system,

whose elements and participants are tied together by fragile, interdependent relations. Hubert Zapf reads it as a functional category based on literature as a form of cultural ecology – as "both as a sensorium for the deficits and imbalances of the larger culture, and as the site of a constant renewal of cultural creativity" (Zapf 2006, 49). "Literature," he elaborates,

> appears as a *sensorium and imaginative sounding board* for hidden problems, deficits, and imbalances of the larger culture, as a form of textuality which critically balances and symbolically articulates what is marginalized, neglected, repressed or excluded by dominant historical power structures, systems of discourse, and forms of life. (2006, 56 [emphasis original])

Cultural ecology thus prevents us from falling into the traps either of resorting to what Kate Soper terms "uncritical ecological naturalism" (149-50), or of confusing such representations with ethnographic evidence. The concept acknowledges that nature is constructed by culture in the first place; always discursively shaped, and translated into various social and political agendas (cf. Soper).[5] As a systemic category, it allows us to explore the narrative strategies by which First Nations artists and writers map space, time, and community into empowered environments and the ways in which culturally specific narratives creatively interact with their North American environments: not only textually representing their coordinates but dynamically (re)constructing them; seismographically registering imbalances within cultural systems, and counteracting upon them. From this angle, cultural ecology not only diversifies the often polarizing debates of ecocriticism,[6] but it contributes to the methodologies of indigenous studies for the twenty-first century.

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5 "In its commonest and most fundamental sense," Soper writes, "the term 'nature' refers to everything which is not human and distinguished from the work of humanity. Thus 'nature' is opposed to culture, to history, to convention, to what is artificially worked or produced, in short, to everything which is defining of the order of humanity" (15).

6 For definitions and methodological summaries of ecocriticism, famously characterized by Cheryll Glotfelty as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (1996, xviii), see Heise 2008, Garrard, Goodbody and Rigby. Ecocriticism is far from a monolithic 'school' of criticism: on the contrary, its various branches have been burdened by dichotomous reductions and by diverse normative claims. As Stephanie Rutherford has recently criticized, much of popular environmentalism is actually a restrictive form of governing: at specific cultural sites where our perception of nature is defined and affirmed (such as museums of natural history or national parks), human beings are invited to align their identities with the power structures of late capitalism, becoming "the environmental citizen as consuming subject" (194). In spite of the fast expanding field of ecocritical practice, therefore, much remains to be done at the theoretical sites of discussion.

### 3. "They All Depended on the Land": Velma Wallis's *Two Old Women* (1993)

When Emily Carr drew her first totem poles in Sitka, Alaska in 1907 (cf. Shadbolt 1979, 28), an American praised the "true Indian flavour" of her sketches (Carr 1946, 211). A rather different version of this flavor is given by Velma Wallis's novel *Two Old Women,* which is also set in Alaska. Based on an orally transmitted narrative "from a time long before the arrival of the Western culture" (Wallis xiii), it tells the story of a nomadic Athabascan community, the Gwich'in, during a severe winter famine. When "the People," as they are called throughout the text, fear that they will soon be facing death from starvation, their tribal leader decides to abandon two of their elders: eighty-year-old Ch'idzigyaak and seventy-five year old Sa'. Reminiscent of Jack London's 1901 story "The Law of Life," in which a blind old man is left behind and killed by wolves, Velma Wallis's tale takes a different turn: instead of resigning themselves to their fate, the two women decide to fight for their survival. Establishing a campsite of their own, they use their knowledge and skills to build a snow shelter, collect firewood, and trap rabbits. Not only do they survive the winter, but through an extremely efficient resource management, they are able to gather a generous surplus of food and clothing during the following spring and summer.

The novel demonstrates that nature is not necessarily a place to conserve and live in harmony with: in Fort Yukon, temperatures drop to minus 34 degrees in the winter, with less than two hours of daylight. In addition to struggling for minimum amounts of nourishment and against exposure, the women are continuously threatened by "the savage wolves that howled in the distance" (67) and by fellow human beings: "They also were afraid that potential enemies might come upon them. Other bands were traveling, too, even in the cold winter, and the women did not want to be exposed to such dangers" (33-34). And even worse than the threat from enemies, they struggle with the "broken trust" to their own tribe and families: They knew "that the cold weather would force people to do desperate things to survive, remembering the taboo stories handed down for generations about how some had turned into cannibals to survive" (34).

The protective power of the community, this tale highlights, can just as easily be reversed. When, the following fall, their tribe begins looking for the women, once more out of resources and on the verge of starvation, a fatal conflict seems to be unavoidable. Yet once they realize that the women have not only survived but stored enough food to share, they agree upon a "new beginning," as the final chapter is entitled: "The People kept their promise. They never again abandoned any elder. They had learned a lesson taught by two whom they came to love and care for until each died a truly happy old woman" (136). This ending crucially highlights the inseparability of ecology from particular social frameworks, which are, at any given time, shaped by individual characters and political decisions.

In light of their traumatic abandonment, it is remarkable how the women react to their new situation as they struggle through the snow and darkness:

> The women stood on the bank for a few moments, resting as their eyes took in the beauty of that special night. Sa' marveled at the power the land held over people like herself, over the animals, and even over the trees. They all depended on the land, and if its rules were not obeyed, quick and unjudgemental death could fall upon the careless and unworthy. (43)

Not only do Sa' and Ch'idzigyaak humbly acknowledge their position within their natural environment, but their perception translates into an aesthetics of the sublime. Filled with both awe and fear, they realize "the beauty" of the world around them, in spite of their slim chances for survival. Later, when they establish their camp and spend the long dark hours sharing stories with each other, they realize that they have established a new, microcosmic community among themselves. "Each woman felt more at home because of her new knowledge of the other" (67), and this community – unlike the one they were banished from – literally survives on values of respect and solidarity.

When *Two Old Women* was first published in 1993, it was showered in heavy criticism. Especially within her own community, Wallis was criticized for the money she made with the book, and thus "for profiting on what had previously been community property, a didactic story handed down as a gift from parent to child in each generation" (Murray X02). More importantly, however, she was charged with conveying "deceptively negative impression of the natives of interior Alaska" (Ruppert 671). "Her presentation of the Gwich'in oral story," Rachel Ramsey summarizes, "was not only rejected for financial and artistic support, but other Native presses in the Alaska area […] wished to have no involvement with a book that addressed such 'taboo' topics and situations" (25).

In contrast to this criticism, Charles Little insists that the novel deserves praise because of its value for modern environmentalism: "Greed and envy," he writes, "inevitably lead to betrayal. Just as the miscreant band of The People betrayed their own wisdom and better selves, so have we betrayed the land ethic in Alaska and everywhere else" (33). While the novel's importance is unquestioned, its reduction to green politics would not do justice to the complex ecological semantics it develops. Velma Wallis's *Two Old Women* contributes to a First Nations cultural ecology in four substantial ways:

First of all, through its detailed and unadorned depiction of what James Ruppert calls a "subsistence lifestyle" (671), this text forcefully de-romanticizes any connection between indigenous identity and nature. There is no harmony among all living things: instead, life is full of hazards, especially when you live in the Yukon. There are no vegetarians in Alaska.

Second, in addition to countering stereotypes of eco-Indians, Velma Wallis's novel also establishes an indigenous cultural ecology in its own right. On a socio-political

level, it clearly dismantles the popular nexus which contrasts a purely ecological indigenous lifestyle with an intruding, more technologically advanced culture. The colonizers are absent from this tale: the conflict is instead an intra-tribal one. In this way, *Two Old Women* underlines the autonomy and validity of indigenous systems of knowledge – testifying to what Gregory A. Cajete describes as a "traditional environmental knowledge that has served the Yup'ik [and other Alaska Natives] in sustaining themselves in one of the harshest environments on earth for thousands of years" (233).

Third, from an ethical point of view beyond its diegetic level, the text itself serves the ecological regulation of what Hubert Zapf calls the "constant renewal of cultural creativity" (2006, 49). Orally transmitted from generation to generation, this narrative provides hope and encourages social solidarity in all circumstances: Due to the specific moral it teaches – never to turn against fellow human beings, no matter how hostile the environment – the tale itself is a tool for survival. Within the cultural ecology of the Gwich'in, it promotes an ethics of interconnectedness and respect even in the most hostile environments – across the centuries, and lastingly into the future.

Fourth and finally, *Two Old Women* also significantly contributes to aesthetic and epistemological alternatives to Western culture as we know it. As an oral narrative that has been handed down from one generation to the next, it is a communally shared system of signifiers rather than an individual engagement with nature. Thus viewed from formal and structural angles, orality and reciprocity serve as alternative modes of knowledge which propel and mediate indigenous cultural ecology.

In line with Timothy Morton's "theory of *ambient poetics*, a materialist way of reading texts with a view to how they encode the literal space of their inscription – if there is such a thing – the spaces between the words, the margins of the page, the physical and social environment of the reader" (2007, 3), Wallis's text responds to, and counter-acts, the Western nostalgic desires for an uncontaminated "Indian" space. On its formal and structural level, it also incorporates such an "ambient poetics" by the large letters, the spacious layout, and the illustrations (all done by Jim Grant, an Athabascan from Alaska). On all four of its levels – in their environmental, intercultural, ethical, and aesthetic effects – the text tells us that the acknowledgement of the Other as different is a crucial prerequisite for a sustainable society, in which simplistic reducations (of vanishing totem poles) are replaced by complex, differentiated systems of meaning.

## 4. "Like the Ghosts of Trees": Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach* (2000)

While Velma Wallis focuses on the old age of two old women, Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach* begins at the other end of human life, depicting the childhood and adolescence of Lisamarie Michelle Hill, a Haisla teenager from Kitamaat in British Columbia. In a mixture of *bildungsroman* and gothic novel, the plot revolves around a maritime quest: the protagonist's younger brother Jimmy has been missing at sea.

As Lisa narrates the attempts of finding him, this plot is continuously interspersed with flashbacks to her childhood and adolescence as well as addresses to the reader, gradually uncovering, as Rob Appleford aptly summarizes, "skeleton after skeleton in her family closet" (n. pag.).

The novel's plot, like Haisla cultural life, is crucially centered on the sea. The ocean, I would like to argue here, serves as a similarly comprehensive matrix for First Nations cultural ecology as the Arctic in Wallis's novel – not only in its obvious way as a natural environment and setting, but also as a powerful agent in Haisla cosmology, as a metaphor, and as a structural and aesthetic principle. These four facets or functional categories effectively dismantle the image of a harmonious relationship between humans and nature and substantially diversify Western parameters of ethnographic or environmentalist "conservation."

First of all, from the novel's very first page, the ocean is tied closely and on multiple layers to Haisla culture. First of all, with "eons of fishermen" (34) in her ancestry, Lisa dedicates substantial parts of her narration to the ocean as a nourishing resource, describing traditional knowledge about the harvesting and cooking of cockles (26), crabs (98), clams (317), halibut (99), oolichan grease (85-86), the catching and smoking of salmon (149) and numerous other kinds of fish, especially as it is safeguarded by her grandmother: "whenever I went to her house, I could count on fish stew, fish casserole, fish cakes, steamed fish, canned fish and dried fish. If it wasn't salmon, it was halibut, rock cod, lingcod or the occasional trout" (239). These animals are firmly inscribed into Haisla mythology, so that the traditional ecological knowledge about when and how to catch the fish is transmitted from one generation to the next by stories (cf. Soper-Jones 26-27). Thus, even in its basic function as a setting, the ocean is more than merely a place. As Katja Sarkowsky has argued, the novel is based on a complex system of different kinds of spatial production – including topographies of places, relationships, histories, and bodies – all of which "coexist, comment on one another, draw on one another, and thus form a web of cultural references and codes" (332). These narrative codes, which Lisa uses as maps to make meaning of her environment, include dreams, visions, and the stories that her grandmother tells her, including the stories of the Stone Man or the sasquatches (113-20, 9-10, 317-18), but they rely just as much on Western sources, including medical science (163-64), biology (165) or Horace's Latin odes: "Those who know the ocean know it doesn't make friends," the narrator states early in the tale: "Exitio est avidum mare nautis – the greedy sea is there to be a doom for sailors" (46).[7]

This insight crucially counterbalances the sea's nourishing features; a second aspect of the novel's engagement of the ocean: especially for Lisa's family, the sea is primarily a violent and destructive force, with stinging jellyfish (61) and regular tsunamis (31). Her uncle Mick is horribly killed and eaten by seals, her grandmother's sister disappeared in the waves during a storm (162), and when she finally finds

7 The quote is from Book I, Ode 28.

Jimmy through a vision, it is in "the land of the dead," as the final chapter is entitled. There are, in fact, several indications that Jimmy is dead: when Lisa enters her vision, she encounters first her grandmother and Mick, both of whom have died. We cannot even be sure if Lisa herself survives her immersion in the water: even though, in the very last sentence, she hears a speedboat "in the distance" (374), which may hint at her possible rescue, a close reading of the text reveals that the same phrase is used when Mick dies at sea: "In the distance, the sound of a speedboat" (135). Foreshadowings of this ending are scattered throughout the novel: Lisa's grandfather tragically drowned in the bathtub (80), and whereas her brother Jimmy has always had an "implicit trust that the water would hold him safely" (46) and finds "his calling" as a swimmer (48), she always remains highly skeptical.

The acknowledgement of the ocean's superseding power is closely interwoven with Lisa's individual fate, but it also goes beyond her family history, and thus beyond an anthropocentric perspective. This is illustrated by a passage in which the narrative perspective changes, and the focalizer is no longer Lisa:

> A sea otter dives. Long streams of sunlight wash through kelp trees, undulating like lazy belly dancers. A purple sea urchin creeps towards a kelp trunk. The otter dips, snatches up the urchin, carries it to the surface, where the sound of the waves breaking on the nearby shore is a bitter grumble. Devouring the urchin's soft underbelly in neat nibbles, the otter twirls in the surf, then dives again. The urchin's shell parachutes to the ocean bottom, landing in the dark, drifting hair of a corpse. (131)

Standing out from the first-person narrative voice that dominates the rest of the novel, this passage highlights the independence of the ocean as an ecosystem, of which death is a regular part. At the same time, the passage is compositionally placed between a revelation that Lisa's mother had an affair with her uncle and the premonition that precedes Mick's death. As a part of the novel's cultural ecology, therefore, the ocean serves – in a third function – as a structural device, connecting different orders of knowledge and narrative, with time levels flowing in and out of each other like the "lazy rolls of waves that crawled up the beach and flattened themselves against the rocks and logs before sliding back towards the ocean" (187).

Fourth and finally, in its manifestations as a larger, encompassing ecosystem, the sea also serves as a central metaphor, a space of semiotic resonance in which other layers of meaning are embedded. As Lisa navigates through her memories, she acknowledges the immeasurability of the oceanic space:

> More than a half-kilometre under the surface, the ocean is perpetually dark, and even artificial light is obscured by the blizzard or falling particles from decaying animals and plants. They fall like snow against the unending darkness. At a depth of one kilometre, the temperature is only

> a few degrees above freezing. Less than one hundredth of a per cent of the deep sea has been glimpsed; astronauts have flown 384,000 kilometres to walk on the moon, but no one has actually set foot on the deepest ocean floor. (124-25)

In addition to its literal inestimability, the ocean becomes a metaphor for anything too large to fathom, including Lisa's pain over Mick's death ("I was drowning" [274]) but also the spiritual world. The steam over the water looks "like the ghosts of trees" (206), especially at the eponymous Monkey Beach, where Lisa has practiced her gift of contacting the dead before. The novel tellingly culminates right there, at the point of convergence between all these realms, in the liminal space between land and sea, the living and the dead. Lisa's grandmother used to warn her of her supernatural abilities, telling her "never [to] trust the spirit world too much" (153). Yet once she arrives at the beach, Lisa offers her body to "the things in the trees" (366), trading her blood for a vision of Jimmy, and while the spirits feed on her, she sees him, together with Mick and her grandmother. The latter warns her once again, telling her that "[u]nless you know how to use it, it will kill you" (371), but even though Lisa realizes that "something is wrong" (371), she cannot make it undone. In the shadow of the trees, she is pulled underwater to the sound of a Haisla farewell song.

Whereas Emily Carr uses the cedars on the coastline as projection screens for something "primeval, immense, full, grand, noble from roots to tips" (1966, 56), the maritime cosmology of Eden Robinson's novel warns against any nostalgic, romanticizing engagement with the Northwestern landscape. In its fourfold portrayal of the ocean – as a source of human sustenance, a fatal and dangerous ecosystem, a structural lever to overturn anthropocentrism, and a metaphorical reminder of human transience – *Monkey Beach* replaces Carr's projection of "the Indian and brave, fine spiritual things" (Carr 1966, 56) with a much more complex cultural ecology; one that is directed towards the future rather than the past, but also one that indiscriminately takes lives.

## 5. Conclusion

To be fair, Emily Carr was, of course, no post-colonial revolutionary. Firmly embedded in the context of her time and, according to Douglas Cole, "a woman of conservative temperament" (147), she subscribed to the discourse of the "vanishing race" – especially in light of the abandoned villages that she herself encountered. Through the absence of First Nations people, however, her paintings harbor a lastingly devastating political message: the conflation of indigenous imagery with a conservationist environmentalist agenda caters to Western modernist nostalgia rather than to an actual First Nations ecology; it is thus a powerful instrument of dispossession and displacement. If Canada's indigenous people are frozen – or conserved – in a 'nature' both past and pastoral, then European Canadian 'culture' is

positioned as a superior antipode; potentially harmful to the ecological balance maybe, but progressive and necessary.

As Wallis's and Robinson's texts demonstrate, the spatial constructions of contemporary First Nations novels offer powerful alternatives to Carr's iconography of the "vanquished," as one of her paintings is entitled. In addition to calling attention to the intersections between cultural difference and global environmental justice now, in the twenty-first century, these fictional texts open up a cultural ecology that leaves room for the Other as different. They emphasize cosmological principles of interconnectedness, reciprocity, and respect without glossing over complex, and sometimes antagonistic, environmental systems. In line with this ecological poetics of the disharmonious, another work of art should be taken into account – exhibited at the same time that Carr's paintings were in Kassel – which perfectly summarizes these principles of an indigenous cultural ecology. At the Sydney Biennale in 2012, an indigenous artists' collective called "Postcommodity" exhibited an installation entitled "Do You Remember When?"[8] Originally created in 2009 for the context of a conference on sustainability, this installation shows a hole that has been cut into the concrete floor of the museum institution. A microphone is suspended over the hole, "listening in" to the earth. From behind the cut block of concrete, which sits on a pedestal, a sound system plays a closed-circuit audio broadcast of "songs and animal calls performed by members of local [aboriginal] communities" (Postcommodity, "Do You"). The hole in the ground brings back into view the earth and land that the museum (representative for the knowledge patterns of the colonizers) has been built on. Through Postcommodity's intervention, the ground – or footing – of the colonialist institution is destabilized; opening new spaces of visibility for the land underneath. "The work," as Postcommodity explain on their website, "shifts the sustainability from a focus dominated by Western science to a balanced approach inclusive of Indigenous knowledge systems" ("Do You"). Instead of a 'Back-to-Nature' approach, however, the installation shows the importance of contemporary technology to translate the signifiers of the land: The microphone suggests that the audible sounds in the room come from the earth itself. This emphasizes the necessity to listen – and to listen closely in order to allow for unexpected environments and alternative patterns of knowledge to emerge.

"Ecological issues," Ursula Heise writes, "are situated at a complex intersection of politics, economy, technology, and culture; envisioning them in their global impli-

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8 Postcommodity is "an interdisciplinary arts collective" that works with installations, video, intermedia art, and performance. Its members are Raven Chacon (Navajo), Cristóbal Martínez (Xicano), Kade L. Twist (Cherokee), and Nathan Young (Delaware/Kiowa/Pawnee) (Postcommodity, "About"). "Postcommodity works to forge new metaphors capable of rationalizing our shared experiences within this increasingly challenging contemporary environment; promote a constructive discourse that challenges the social, political and economic processes that are destabilizing communities and geographies; and connect Indigenous narratives of cultural self-determination with the broader public sphere" ("About").

cations requires an engagement with a variety of theoretical approaches to globalization, especially, for ecocritics, those that focus on its cultural dimension" (2006, 514). Instead of projection screens for white guilt or the highly marketable icons of the eco-Indian, these works of art offer us precisely this engagement – combined with ironic, humorous, and resistant performative stances – as part of an innovative, rather than a conservative – or even just conservationist – politics of cultural ecology.

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