

Simon Campbell – 34982165

FNIS 220 – Representation and Indigenous Cultural Politics

Research Essay

9 April, 2020

Indigenizing the Human Imagination: *How Indigenous Speculative Fiction Acts as a Form of Literary Resistance*

When we speak of the nature of reality (i.e. the metaphysical), we speak of the existence of things and the relationships between them. The other-worldly may be thought of as that which is separate from our known reality. This distinction is an important aspect of western scientific thought, as we are taught to identify and separate that which is objectively real, and that which is not; what is otherwise considered to be fantasy. However, I am not so much interested in the philosophical branch of metaphysics, or in discussing western scientific epistemologies; rather, I am more interested in the separation between reality and fantasy – how it operates as a form of colonial violence, and what it means for it to be challenged.

Eden Robinson's novel *Trickster Drift* is a work of speculative fiction that offers an insightful examination of the nature of reality as well as our relationship to it. In this essay, I attempt to show how Robinson's work breaks down the distinction between reality and fantasy by both naturalizing the other-worldly and defamiliarizing western-scientific epistemologies. Robinson actively confronts our reluctance to integrate fantasy and reality, and by doing so challenges Euro-western ideas of reality. I argue that this process of defamiliarization is a form of Indigenous resistance, which situates Indigenous realities at the forefront of the human

imagination. In addition, I will use the work of Daniel Heath Justice as a secondary source in my examination of *Trickster drift*. In particular, Chapter 3 of Justice's *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* provides a background to the relevance of *Speculative Fiction* in Indigenous literature, which helps contextualize Robinson's work.

*Trickster Drift* follows Jared Martin, a seventeen-year-old who is simultaneously battling sobriety, a stalker, and a world full of ghosts, spirits and supernatural activity. Soon after moving into his Aunt Mave's apartment, Jared is constantly bombarded with the antics of other-worldly beings as they blend into Jared's everyday life. As the novel progresses, Jared becomes increasingly familiar and unfazed by the supernatural entering his world.

One of the ways in which Robinson's work breaks down the distinction between reality and fantasy, is through the naturalization of the other-worldly. She does this by seamlessly integrating the supernatural and the everyday normal occurrences together, blending reality and fantasy together. For example, one of the first instances of naturalization occurs in a brief interaction between Jared and the painted heads, which are one of many supernatural characters Jared encounters at his Aunt Mave's apartment; the painted heads "smiled at him as he walked past", and how Jared "smiled back and then realized how bizarre that was, but it seemed rude to do anything else" (232). Robinson's use of personification depicts the painted heads as supernatural beings with human-like qualities, able to smile and interact with Jared in the same manner as any *real* being would. There is a tangible relationship between Jared and the painted heads; one which goes beyond the sort of fear and disturbance that is associated with the Euro-western ideas of the supernatural. This is again reinforced when Robinson describes how Jared's reaction was informed by the fact that the painted heads "liked him and they had been his first

warning against the thing in the wall...It couldn't hurt to be polite" (232). Here, we also see use of humor in Robinson's unfolding of the relationship between Jared and the Painted heads; between the real and the other-worldly. The supernatural has become an everyday occurrence that is a familiar part of Jared's day-to-day routine. The other-worldly, in this case, is naturalized in Jared's life. This brief interaction shows us how the distinction between reality and the other-worldly becomes unclear when the supernatural is presented as a natural occurrence.

Another way that Robinson breaks this distinction, is by defamiliarizing us from western-scientific epistemologies. In this case, I refer to defamiliarization as a process of introducing uncertainty and discontinuity to something that was otherwise understood and accepted. *Trickster Drift* contains short passages, or vignettes that express tangential ideas that (at least I think) help re-situate the reader throughout the novel. One of these passages in particular; *Spook*, perfectly exemplifies Robinson's attempt to defamiliarize the epistemologies together in a way that leaves the reader with an unfamiliar relationship to western science. Robinson describes a leaf and the scientific process of photosynthesis, then going on to define the physical properties of light (184). This leads into a description of Einstein's theory of relativity and quantum mechanics and the idea of entanglement, which starts to break down scientific understanding into something completely unknown and not well understood; being described by Einstein as "spooky action at a distance" (185). Robinson describes the leaf as an object seemingly well understood by science, while simultaneously the actual things governing those processes are completely unknown to us; being what Robinson refers to as "the void" (186). However, the final paragraph of this passage does the bulk of the literary work. Robinson re-contextualizes western-science within an other-worldly imagination, which challenges the assumptions and logic behind the Euro-western

cartographic view of reality; one which can only describe the “places beyond their known world” with terms that are tangible to the Euro-western epistemology: “here be Dragons” (186). On the other hand, a more humanistic way of describing the other-worldly, is to say “here is magic” (186).

By placing western-science in this context, we are brought away from it. Its logic is challenged. Robinson’s distinction between humans and cartographers is unnerving because we are defamiliarized from scientific logic – it seems a more natural, a more human quality to accept the magic that occurs in our universe; in something as insignificant as a leaf. This passage I find necessary to the greater work occurring in *Trickster Drift*. It resists the western-scientific definition of reality and brings the Indigenous imagination to the forefront the human imagination. Robinson’s contextual overlaying of other-worldly “magic” with scientific logic makes the separation between the real and the fictional become obsolete, as we are detached from the cartographer’s narrow view of reality; it is unfamiliar to us.

Thinking about Robinson’s work as a form of resistance brings about questions regarding its greater significance within the literary context, concerning how it operates, what it accomplishes, and why it is important. In his book *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*, Daniel Heath Justice helps contextualize Robinson’s work within the broader range of Indigenous literature. Chapter 3 - *How Do We Become Good Ancestors?*, describes how literature functions as a way of ensuring continuity through generations; a way in which Indigenous peoples honor their social responsibilities to ancestors. Indigenous fiction writing in particular is a very important component of Indigenous literary expression, as it embodies a vision of the future; a way in which Indigenous peoples challenge the western narratives of Indigenous culture as a relic of the past, by ensuring continuity over generations through situating Indigenous culture/expression at the

forefront of modernity. However, Justice outlines how Traditional “fantasy” writing carries the connotation of being escapist and delusional potential to “justify all kinds of exclusions and oppressive policies (141). Speculative fiction, on the other hand, can be thought of as genre of literature that offers “strategies that can undo the violence of the deficit models of ‘the real’ and offer transformative visions of other lives, experiences, and histories” (142), while directly opposing the Indigenous realism within the colonial imaginary that relies on presumptions of deficiency.

Eden Robinson is one of many contemporary Indigenous writers of speculative fiction (Justice 149). The ways in which Robinson breaks down the barriers between the real and the other-worldly serve to weaken the limitations put on Indigenous characters and readers, which Justice describes as challenging the assumptions of the “reality” imposed by western-science “thus complicating and undermining the dominant... functions of the deficit model” (149). Euro-western epistemologies rely on the assumption of a singular objective reality, where the other worldly and all other cultural expressions that are “inconsistent with that interpretation are deficient...” (142). Robinson’s work is an active resistance to this corrosive and narrow view; one that Justice refers to as a “moral imperative” that is required within Indigenous literary expression (142).

*Trickster Drift* - what Justice would define as an “Indigenous Wonderwork” (153) – is a reminder that there are alternative ways of experiencing the world and our relationships within it. These relationships can encompass more than the merely “physical” but the other-worldly as well. By naturalizing other-worldly and defamiliarizing western-scientific epistemologies, Robinson’s work is a critical engagement with the active and repressive forces that seek to reinforce the distinction between fiction and reality, an engagement defined by resistance. Therefore,

Indigenous fiction is not only important insofar as it revitalizes the Indigenous imagination and provides a future that is characterized by Indigenous presence; it also revitalizes the human imagination, further deepening the age-old question of what it means to be human.

Works Cited

Justice, Daniel Heath. *Why Indigenous literatures matter*. Wilfrid Laurier Univ. Press, 2018.

Robinson, Eden. *Trickster Drift*. Penguin Random House Canada - Vintage Canada Edition, 2019.