Child Narrators, Conceptions of Reality, and Minority Identity in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* and Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach*

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In her work, *Is Canada Postcolonial? Unsettling Canadian Literature*, Laura Moss raises the question about the treatment of Canada as a postcolonial province due to its unique nature as an "invader-settler" nation, as opposed to a nation like Nigeria, where colonialism was primarily a form of resource extraction and domination above anything else (2). Furthermore, she foregrounds the perceived incomparability of Canada and Nigeria because of "vastly different histories, relationships with imperial power, contemporary social and political environments, and current relationships to globalization" (2). This myth of incomparability is produced due to the focus on the dominant narratives of the nation and its centrality in understanding the world. The emphasis on national shape, features, and relationship with empire blinds us from the inherent coloniality of the nation, a point expressed by Moss as "yet, Canada as a colonizing power in relation to the First Nations must bear scrutiny, just as Nigeria needs to be accountable, for instance, in relation to the Ogoni struggle" (2). What Moss foregrounds here is the inherent coloniality of both the Nigerian and Canadian nation-states, similar to what Partha Chatterjee describes as "derivative nationalism" (2). Chatterjee's description reacts to the idea that the modern nation is inherently colonial, and what we see as nationalism in a postcolonial context is simply the colonial state being appropriated by formerly colonized peoples. Nigeria and Canada are nations produced by the same British colonizing force, and while their modern shape and realities might be very different, the nation, in both contexts, continues to perpetuate its inherent coloniality. This is one of the reasons why it is important to study minority writings from radically different post/colonial contexts like Nigeria and Canada. In this article, I read the construction of minority identity in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* and Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach* as responses to the inherent coloniality of the nation even as I dismount the myth of incomparability in both contexts.

I describe the selected novels as postcolonial Bildungsroman novels. I acknowledge that this description is contentious due to the Eurocentricity of the Bildungsroman. However, scholars like Ralph Austen and Ogaga Okuyade have problematized this category in the African context in terms of its European generic conformity and localized content and character. Austen comments that "in their

specificity of indigenous 'tradition' and a foreign, colonial 'modernity,' African Bildungsromane address a different history than their European counterparts; but by embracing a European narrative form, they only enrich our understanding of the genre as well as Africa's place in the world" (228). Here, Austen reveals that although the form might be imbricated with the idea of Western modernity, it could be a useful way to understand Africa as a postcolonial province. This idea is present in Okuyade's reading of what he frames as "African female Bildungsroman" as a form that draws "attention to the specific experiences of the African woman within a particular historical and socio-cultural background" (163). Like Austen, Okuyade circumvents debates about the inherent coloniality of the genre by focusing on its resistive impulse. Although the Bildungsroman is typically associated with national narratives (Joseph Slaughter 1418), it could also be an instrument for narrating marginality within the nation. Slaughter suggests this point in his assertion that the form provides "normative literary technology by which social outsiders narrate affirmative claims for inclusion in the franchise of the nation-state" (1411). It is in this sense that I read minority identity in Nigeria and Canada and its articulation in the postcolonial Bildungsroman, a form used by minority writers to contest the coloniality of the nation-state. By focusing on the comparative value of the postcolonial Bildungsroman and its child narrator, we can contest the myth of incomparability between nations like Nigeria and Canada.

To understand how the postcolonial Bildungsroman form is appropriated in constructing minority identity, it is important to conceptualize the child narrator and its centrality to identity formation. The child narrator is a category that has received some engagement in literary criticism and theory because of its peculiar perspective and its formal place in genres like the Bildungsroman. Abioseh Michael Porter credits Charles Dickens with the popularization of children in fiction (2), and he theorizes the link between the representation of children and the advancement of capitalism and the bourgeois class in nineteenth-century England (4-5). Furthermore, he engages the child-narrator in fiction using the categories of "diarist," "autobiographer," and "cynic," and concludes that his selected authors choose child narrators because they are regarded as "inferior" (74). This notion of the "inferiority" or "subalternity" of children is also taken up by Roderick McGillis and Meena Khorana (7), and Sandra Dinter (54). In their essays, the child narrator becomes an active agent in articulating the author's vision and politics. This distinction between the child narrator as an agent and the child narrator as a child is emphasized in Robyn Wilkinson's suggestion that "readers must always be cognisant of the fact that it is not in fact a child speaking, but an adult author speaking through the voice of a child" (126). Following this position, my article begins with the assumption that child narrators are used

agentially to represent subalternity and that the child narrator's conception of reality is an important space for articulating the author's vision and politics. I read the child narrator's construction of reality in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* and Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach* as representations of the liminal spaces they occupy in their societies, especially as members of ethnic minority groups in complex nations and as members of an age group at the verge of establishing personal and collective identities.

The child narrator is central to the construction of identity in fiction. This is a point that Robert Muponde makes in his comment that "childhood is central to the construction of worldviews, and cannot be studied in isolation from society as a whole" (107). Muponde further establishes how a child narrator could function as a "real active subject of history" (111) whose construction of reality could speak to broader political realities. As a liminal space that explores the formation of the human mind and reality, the child narrator's construction of reality, in many ways, mirrors the way those at the margin of society might construct their realities. The implication then is that, in the liminal space of childhood, the narrative voice could be an agent of resistance. One way in which the resistive impulse of the child narrator manifests itself is in the ability "to use the imagination with freedom and flair, to create possible realities" (Susan Mann 338). In essence, the child narrator's conception of reality from the position of liminality could be a site of resistance. Realities that are deeply imbricated in myths and the spirit world, or what has been theorized as magical realism, are particularly useful in reading the resistive impulse to reality and, especially in the postcolonial context, colonial modernity. Both Okri's and Robinson's child narrators possess supersensory abilities that are important in reading their resistance to the coloniality of the nation-state and modernity.

Several critical works exist on Okri's *The Famished Road* and Robinson's *Monkey Beach*. José Santiago Fernández Vázquez describes *The Famished Road* as a "postcolonial Bildungsroman." To Vázquez, the novel describes the passage of a central character from "innocence to experience" (86), and he goes further to explain how Okri uses the Bildungsroman medium to subvert the generic conventions of the form. He comments that

> the traditional *Bildungsroman* is based on a dialectical process: the protagonist exhibits a profound disagreement with his family or society. At the end of the novel this opposition is resolved and some kind of compromise is established […] Yet this dialectical structure does not respond to the necessities of women, racial and sexual minorities, or to the historical experience of the colonized peoples. (87)

Despite not taking it up, his essay highlights the potential of the Bildungsroman in foregrounding minority identity, especially in the

postcolonial context. Focusing more on the *abiku* narrator, John Hawley comments on the conception of reality in *The Famished Road*:

> Okri's use of the *abiku* is, perhaps, the most cogent and concentrated version of the poignancy of such a witness: this is a character who still remembers bits of knowledge acquired in his former life, one who can often see through the material world of objects. (31)

Hawley locates the novel in the postmodern frame and theorizes how the *abiku* narrator conceives reality from this frame. In the same vein, Olatubosun Ogunsawo claims that "[w]hat makes *The Famished Road* postcolonial and multicultural both in form and content is precisely what makes it postmodernist, that is, its response to 'the need to clear oneself a space.' By means of mythic narration, Okri clears a space for the quintessential texture and structure of African folkloric narrative" (42). His attempt to situate the novel in a postmodernist context is hinged on what he describes as the "parodic intertextuality" of Nigerian literary traditions (49). To him, Okri contests the "dominant […] perception of, and approach to, different cultural phenomena" (50).

Robinson's *Monkey Beach* is also described as a Bildungsroman by Richard Lane. Lane engages the novel from the perspective of First Nations gender and trickster writing and submits that

> on one level it is a bildungsroman, a novel of education and development. But the educational data as such are also the least realistic or material, cutting across logical spatio-temporal relations, breaking generic boundaries (or at the least, reworking them). (170)

Lane's statement reveals that the novel, like others in the postcolonial Bildungsroman tradition, subverts generic norms and draws from two different cultural forces, "indigenous, First Nations culture(s) and postcolonial mainstream Canadian culture(s)" (162), in order to create "new ways of thinking through contemporary First Nations fiction" (170). Janie Beriault's study of the "gothic landscape" in *Monkey Beach* foregrounds the liminality of the narrator, Lisa, who remains in a "marginal position between the supernatural and the secular as well as on the border of the living and the dead" (10). Beriault's submission is motivated by an assumption according to which Robinson adopts and subverts the generic conventions of the gothic novel. This positioning of the novel within the gothic tradition is also echoed in Jennifer Andrews's reading of the novel as a subverted gothic in which "Haisla viewpoints dominate […] and the sense that whatever disorder or confusion the characters experience is as a result of their negotiating the often-jarring juxtapositions of Native and non-Native viewpoints" (10). Andrews also emphasizes the novel's representation of the impacts of Eurocentrism on Native people's culture and identity. Further complicating the novel's generic

situatedness, Anja Mrak describes *Monkey Beach* as "a hybrid between a Bildungsroman and a mystery novel" (6), and with insights from trauma and postcolonial studies, she reads the child narrator's reality as a product of both personal and collective trauma (7).

In this article, I position Okri's *The Famished Road* and Robinson's *Monkey Beach* as postcolonial Bildungsroman novels; however, I am interested in how both authors use the form to suit their artistic vision in their texts. I am particularly concerned with how the child narrator's point-of-view is used to inscribe a certain type of liminal reality that is informed by minority consciousness. My understanding of minority and minority discourse streams from Abdul R. JanMohamed and David Lloyd's position that "minority discourse, is, in the first instance, the product of damage, of damage more or less systematically inflicted on cultures produced as minorities by the dominant cultures" (7). This damage includes:

> bearing down on variant modes of social formation, dismantling previously functional economic systems, deracinating whole populations at best, decimating them at worst. In time with this material destruction, the cultural formations, languages, the diverse modes of identity of the "minoritized peoples" are irreversibly affected, if not eradicated, by the effects of their material deracination from the historically developed social and economic structures in terms of which alone they 'made sense'. (7)

Furthermore, JanMohamed and Lloyd contend that the minoritization of people by dominant forces leads to the coding of the minorities as "the underdeveloped, the imperfect, the childlike" (8). I find this statement helpful in thinking about the place of child narrators in representing minority identity in fiction. It appears then that the adoption of child narrators is performative in two senses: it "normalizes" the childlike state that is both subaltern and developing, and it uses this point-of-view to inscribe a certain type of childhood liminality that questions reality.

Tanure Ojaide's theorization of the aesthetics of minority discourse also provides a valuable lens to read Okri and Robinson's novels. Drawing from Foucauldian power discourse, which foregrounds the centrality of power and resistance to power as an index of human society, Ojaide foregrounds the resistive liminality of minoritized persons through the metaphor of madness: "The minorities are perceived as 'mad' by the majority groups" (17). To Ojaide, things are turned "upside down" (22) in minority writing as a way of countering domination in "majority or dominant tradition, whether it is in sociocultural, political, economic, racial, or other terms" (22). This subversion of norm, Ojaide argues, finds its space in literary form, and writers break down the dominant, however it is imagined, in order to affirm a unique identity and ethos (22).

There is a centrality of liminality in JanMohamed and Lloyd's and Ojaide's theorizations of minority discourse. Putatively understood as

"in-betweenness," liminality is a way to read minority identity in Okri's *The Famished Road* and Robinson's *Monkey Beach*. In *The Famished Road*, we have the child narrator, Azaro, a spirit-child or *abiku* who is rooted in the land of the living, the dead, and the unborn, and thus always in touch with the transitional gulf that Wole Soyinka calls the "chthonic realm" (26-27). Azaro decides to remain in the world of the living, resisting the trajectory of the mythic spirit-child who is expected to be locked in an eternal cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. The choice to remain in the material world is his, but he also chooses to maintain contact with the supernatural realm in his declaration that "I didn't want to entirely lose contact with that other world of light and rainbows and possibilities" (9). Azaro's choice to remain in the Soyinkean chthonic realm foregrounds his liminality throughout the novel. He exists in a realm where the physical collides with the supernatural, and his conception of reality draws from his positionality in this realm. Madam Koto mediates Azaro's conception of reality by allowing him to work in her bar, a place where the physical and the metaphysical collide. I contend that Azaro's deliberate choice to remain in this liminal position is an allegory of his minority identity. Even though Okri does not specifically hint at Azaro's family's ethnic background, there are two reasons why I read the novel in this way. The first is hinged on Okri's Urhobo background; the Urhobo are considered an ethnic minority in Nigeria, and having lived outside Urhobo land for most of his life, Okri is expected to be in a unique liminal space, whether in Nigeria or elsewhere in the world. The second reason is that only one place is mentioned throughout the narrative, and that is "Ughelli" (480). Even though it is evident that Ughelli is not the primary setting of the novel, it is implied that Azaro's family originates from this region. Ughelli is a town in Nigeria's Niger Delta region, and it is a significant cultural unit of the Urhobo people. The Niger Delta is considered a minority region in Nigeria due to its relatively lower population and the indigenous people's clamour for better representation, human rights, and resource control. Oyeniyi Okunoye describes the region as Nigeria's "Other" (416) and comments that "the shared agony of the people based on perceived neglect and exposure to the ecological disasters from oil exploration, seems, ironically, to have become a stronger basis for a Pan-Niger Delta identity" (420). Okunoye's description reveals how minority identity has been constructed in the region due to shared socio-political marginality.

The motif of the road is dominant in Okri's *The Famished Road*. As a site of movement and connection, the road takes center space in the narrative. In the novel's mythmaking beginning, the narrator says, "IN THE BEGINNING there was a river. The river became a road and the road branched out to the whole world" (3). The road is narrated into being in two ways: it represents the connection between the

invisible realm where the *abiku* child comes from and the visible world, as well as the site where modernity dismantles "previously functional economic systems." Azaro's grandfather is the head-priest of the "God of Roads" (70) and has a certain level of control over the road's liminal significance. Azaro's father fails to take up this role and largely becomes a victim of its might. Azaro, however, conceives the road as a border between one world and the other: "One day I was playing on the sand when they called me from across the road with the voice of my mother. As I went towards the voice a car almost ran me over" (8). In this scene, he describes the call of his spirit companions from the invisible realm, and only the road divides what is visible and what is not.

So central is the road to Azaro that almost every action, dream, or wandering involves the road as a symbolic buffer zone between the village and the "forest," and even between the village and the "city." In the final scene, where it appears that Azaro gets a temporary sense of normalcy, a "good breeze" blows through the road and cleans the "strange excesses in the air" (500). The implication is that the road functions as both the symbolic and concrete representation of Azaro's liminal position. The road also signals Azaro's subaltern position in the physical world in the way it separates the real from the supernatural. As an agent of deracination in its removal of Azaro from the supernatural, and as an indicator of modernity's transformation of a pristine "river" world to an economically and politically dysfunctional system, the road takes up the space of domination and Azaro, symbolic of JanMohamed and Lloyd's minority "collective," resists the road's onslaught by choosing to remain on both sides of the road. This choice does not appear logical in the first instance, but the physical end of the "road" is colored by poverty, oppression by politicians and their agents, avarice, and other social maladies. Azaro fails to grasp this reality fully, and his narration is inflected by its irreconcilability with the ideal. In one instance at Madam Koto's bar, the reader is shown Azaro's description of supernatural beings as "politicians":

> I struggled and fought, but they expertly bundled me in and tied up the sack as if I were an animal. And as I resisted; kicking, I heard the noises of the world, the voices of all the different people who had been in the bar. They talked in their inhuman languages in leisurely animation, as if they were merely setting out on a pilgrimage to a distant land. Overcome with fear, unable to move, surrounded by darkness and the death-smells of the sack, I cried: 'Politicians! Politicians are taking me away!' My voice was very faint, as if I were shouting in a dream. Even if I had cried out with the voice of thunder, no one would have heard me. (111)

This scene confirms that the supernatural beings that Azaro describes are mental transformations of real people who participate in his minoritization. As a child narrator, he codes the mythic into the real, and only the road separates the realm of wonder and disillusionment.

Thus, the road, and not the river at its end, produces the supernatural beings that influence the incongruity of Azaro's reality.

The road is also narrated as a concrete platform that divides the old and the new order. In the novel, Azaro frequently notes the destruction of the "forest" and the "trees" by workers who build roads and other things associated with the "civilizing mission" of colonialism and consequent nation-building:

> The road was endless. One road led to a thousand others, which in turn fed into paths, which fed into dirt tracks, which became streets, which ended in avenues and cul-de-sacs. All around, a new world was being erected amidst the old. Skyscrapers stood high and inscrutable beside huts and zinc abodes. Bridges were being built; flyovers, half-finished, were like passageways into the air, or like future visions of a time when cars would be able to fly. Roads, half-constructed, were crowded with heavy machinery. (113)

In this scene, the road is concretized and presented as the link between an old pristine order and a new modernizing society. In this spatio-temporal liminal space, Azaro "walked on with a terrible hunger for a destination, for Mum's face, and Dad's smells" (113). He seeks his family, home, and an identity that "normalizes" the transformation of his society. This transformation sees the birth of vicious and divisive politics, as well as marginalization of different forms. Even amongst the poor, like Azaro's family, "rats" and figures like the landlord, co-tenants, Madam Koto, political thugs, and the like, complicate Azaro's reality in this strange new order. His father's overbearing presence and violence also push Azaro further into his liminal space. The concrete road, symbolic of modernity and postcolonial nationalism, alters the structuring of society and codifies a type of difference that is economic and political. Azaro cannot grasp this difference and constantly slips into a domain where he is the main actor or subject. Initially represented as a victim of circumstances, Azaro takes to resistance to deal with the absurdity of his reality.

Resistance is coded as "madness" in Ojaide's theorization of minority discourse. Echoing Foucault's concept of the diffusion of power and resistance in all aspects of society, Ojaide asserts that "the unconventional, rebel, deviant, or abnormal folks of society are shamed so as to conform, but many will resist the strong tactics of power. The minorities are perceived as 'mad' by the majority […] One can posit that in the more liberal climate of today, there are bound to be many 'madmen' fighting a war of 'resistance' against the 'power' of the establishment" (17). If we take madness as a form of resistance, we can read Azaro's strange reality as a protest against normalcy. Despite a near-death experience, Azaro chooses to maintain ties with the spirit world and even hates the herbalist for suggesting that they find the "spirit tokens" that he has hidden in secret places (341). This need to cling to the liminal space between the spirit world and the real world is

a form of resistance. His apparent madness takes a political function because he can see people for who they are. When the politicians gather at Madam Koto's bar, Azaro's liminal position allows him to see them beyond their physical appearance:

> In the terrible heat of the dance, I saw that, among the erotic dancers, the politicians and chiefs, the power merchants, the cultists, paid supporters, thugs and prostitutes, all moving to the beat of the new music, among them all, there were strangers to the world of the living. I saw that some of the prostitutes, who would be future brides of decadent power, had legs of goats. Some of the women, who were chimeras and sirens and broken courtesans, had legs of spiders and birds. Some of the politicians and power merchants, the chiefs and innocent-looking men, who were satyrs and minotaurs and satanists, had the cloven hoofs of bulls. Their hoofs and bony legs were deftly covered with furry skin. Fully clothed, they danced as men and women when in fact they were the dead, spirits, and animals in disguise, part-time human beings dancing to the music of ascendant power. (459-460)

The characterization of people as half-human and half-supernatural or as supernatural beings in human skin features strongly in the novel. This characterization comes from Azaro's peculiar vision, and I argue that this vision is a form of resistance. Azaro defies all attempts to be understood by those around him. Madam Koto frequently calls him "strange," and many of the supernatural guests in her bar are repulsed or curious about him. In one instance, one of the guests asks Madam Koto to get women to serve them instead of "that strange child" (193).

Azaro's ineffability is described in terms of madness in one of the scenes where he performs resistance by spitting into the mouth of a grotesque character in Madam Koto's surreal bar. His resistance is motivated by his perception of their supernatural form, and instead of allowing himself to become a victim, as he had done many times before in the narrative, he resists domination through the performance of spitting. His resistance, true to Ojaide's theorization, is construed as madness by the dominant:

> 'The boy is insane,' said another of the three.
> 'Unbalanced,' said the first.
> 'Drunk,' said the second.
> 'Hold him!' said the third.
> 'Yes, grab him before he spits at us'. (135)

I use "dominant" here in a relational sense. Azaro is a minority figure in many ways and in his interaction with others in society, he is almost always dominated, far beyond the normal for a child. Azaro's minoritization leads to other forms of resistance, such as his attack of the blind old man with a catapult (397), his verbal defiance of the midget woman (274), and even his refusal to obey his parents' orders that he should not wander; these are all forms of resistance that are encoded into Azaro's character development. By normalizing his

reality, Azaro develops resistance to his domination by the road and the characters on the physical end of its liminal position.

Azaro's conception of reality, his liminality, and his performative and verbal resistance can be read in the context of Niger Delta minority discourse. Okri's minority politics is not clearly evident, but reading his child narrator's decision to maintain liminality as a form of personal identity, as well as his resistance to different forms of domination, easily finds theoretical corroboration in JanMohamed and Lloyd's submission that

> in those societies caught in the transition from oral, mythic, collective cultures to the literate, "rational", individualistic values and characteristics of Western cultures, the writer more often than not manifests the collective nature of social structuration in forms such as the novel, thus transforming what were once efficacious vehicles for the representation of individually, atomistically oriented experiences. However, more importantly, the collective nature of all minority discourse also derives from the fact that minority individuals are always treated and forced to experience themselves generically. (9-10)

This excerpt motivates my situating of Azaro's minority identity within the larger framework of Niger Delta minority discourse, especially regarding the Urhobo people of the Niger Delta. One of the ways we can read the transitional gulf called the "road" in the novel is that it is a site where people move from the "oral, mythic, collective cultures" to the reality of Western modernity. This movement is quite traumatic and manifests itself as the spectre of the unresolved past that insinuates into the present. Azaro's point-of-view and his conception of reality are good examples of how the mythic shatters the materiality of the present. His "negative" individual position transforms into a "collective one" (JanMohamed and Lloyd 10). This is the logic that informs my argument that the child narrator, Azaro, is a collective voice of the minoritized people of the Niger Delta of Nigeria. The resistance to their status in the forms of verbal vocality and other performative acts is prefigured in Azaro's voice as a child narrator. By using the Bildungsroman form, Okri tells the story of the development of a society in which people exist at the margins and how they resist dominance from their liminal position.

Unlike Okri, Robinson is very clear about the politics of her novel. A member of the Haisla nation, she represents issues that directly implicate First Nations minority identity and indigeneity in Canada. *Monkey Beach* centers on Lisamarie Michelle Hill's life in Kitaamat, one of the several Haisla communities in the modern Canadian province of British Columbia. The narrative slips between the past and present; in the past, the reader sees the growth of Lisa and her relationship with her family, friends, and the supernatural world around her, and in the present, she goes on a search for her brother, Jimmy, who goes missing in a fishing expedition on *Queen of the North*. Lane's comment that "it is possible that the novel is *too easy* to

read as a *Bildungsroman*" (170) is probably motivated by its seeming conformity to the genre in terms of plot structure. However, Lisa is a character who defies the generic nature of the central character of the Bildungsroman. The "appearance" of generic conformity does not occlude the novel's subversion of the genre. Robinson's inscription of First Nations' mythic reality and folklore into the narrative ruptures its appearance of generic conformity, and she uses the outcome to "normalize" Lisa's experience and foreground minority identity.

A central motif in the novel is the search for sasquatches. On one level, Lisa's search for Jimmy is built upon and preempted in Jimmy's earlier search for sasquatches as a young boy. On another level, the search for sasquatches reveals the presence of the unresolved past in the present. The sasquatches, which are elusive and constitute part of the liminal space that Lisa embraces, are symbolic of an old order. In a colonized and marginalized society such as the Haisla nation, the old communal nature of life falls apart with the influence of colonial modernity and dominance. In the space between the old and the new, Lisa conceives a reality that is in touch with the old mythic world and the new colonized society. It is in this space that the search for sasquatches, emblematic of an old order, is important. The initial search for sasquatches is Jimmy's idea, and Lisa is simply a passive participant in it, but when she catches a glimpse of the elusive creature, she enters into a liminal space that consequently dots the landscape of her reality:

> Suddenly, every hair on my body prickled. The trees were thick, and beneath them everything was hushed. A raven croaked somewhere above. I couldn't hear anyone calling for Jimmy. I could hear myself breathing. I could feel someone watching me. "Jimmy?"
> The sweat on my body was stinging cuts and scratches I hadn't been aware of before, was drying fast, making my skin cold. I turned very slowly. No one was behind me. I turned back and saw him. Just for a moment, just a glimpse of a tall man, covered in brown fur. He gave me a wide, friendly smile, but he had too many teeth and they were all pointed. He backed into the shadows, then stepped behind a cedar tree and vanished. (15-16)

In this excerpt, we see Lisa's transformation as she encounters the creature. The sasquatch, portrayed in the story that her father tells her as a malevolent creature, smiles at her, thus confirming Ma-ma-oo's version of the sasquatch or B'gwus as a docile creature (9). Her experience in this scene prefigures her liminal position in the narrative.

Lisa's encounter with the sasquatch triggers a conception of reality where the visible collides with the invisible. She begins to see the little man after the first monkey beach experience (20) and not too long after, she starts hearing and seeing ghosts and other supernatural beings. This liminal space she occupies is complemented by her close relationship with Ma-ma-oo, representative of an old order and knowledge system, and Mick, her uncle, who is deeply attuned with Haisla identity and the American Indian Movement. Ma-ma-oo is the

family's matriarch, and she is instrumental to Lisa's cultural education and her conception of reality. Ma-ma-oo asks Lisa to accept the supernatural world and educates her on how it operates. In one such instance, she performs a small ritual in honour of Ba-ba-oo:

> "This is for Sherman," she said, placing it carefully near the centre of the flames. "You'd better appreciate that. Say hi to your ba-ba-oo, Lisa."
> "But he's not here," I said.
> "Yes, he is," she said. "You just can't see him, because he's dead."
> I frowned. "Can you see him?"
> "She gets it from you," Ma-ma-oo said to the air again. "No, I can't see him. He's dead. He can come to you only in dreams. Be polite and say hello when you give him food." (78-79)

Ma-ma-oo's statement that Lisa "gets it" from Ba-ba-oo indicates that her supersensory abilities are normal and she invites Lisa to accept the normalcy of seeing ghosts or other beings. Ma-ma-oo's education supersedes the formal education Lisa receives in school. When Lisa tells Ma-ma-oo about the "little man" who appears to her before something terrible happens, Ma-ma-oo tells her that she has "the gift" (153). Thus, Ma-ma-oo normalizes Lisa's reality and educates her about it.

Mick's close bond with Lisa is also essential in her conception of reality. Named after him, Mick's influence on Lisa is far beyond her parents', and the bond she shares with him strengthens her liminal position. Mick is a product of Canada's Indian residential school system and it is hinted that he and his sister, Trudy, were abused in the system (255). This explains Mick and Trudy's eccentricity. Mick is deemed mad by many because of his trauma and how he deals with it. Furthermore, it is suggested that he also possesses some supersensory abilities when he admits to Lisa that he can "hear voices singing on the lake" (118). Mick is Lisa's second educator about life, as well as First Nations activism and radicality. The influence of Ma-ma-oo and Mick enables Lisa to normalize her liminality. As a story of growth and education, Lisa's liminal reality is inflected by Ma-ma-oo's Haisla mythic reality, Mick's anti-colonial radicality and eccentricity, and the modernizing world she grows up in.

Lisa's fascination with sasquatches and her search for them allegorizes her search for personal identity, and by extension, foregrounds her minority identity. In a relational sense, Lisa is minoritized by the changes caused by modernity's institutions, especially her school and the city (Vancouver). When she is raped by Cheese, her classmate and friend (258), she protests against the little man for not helping her and loses her sense of identity. Ma-ma-oo's demise further complicates this, and unable to deal with the traumas, she leaves Kitaamat for Vancouver. In what is supposed to be a brief return home, she sees a sasquatch on the way:

> As I was driving around a curve, a man came out of the bushes and crossed the road ten metres ahead of me. As I slammed on the brakes, he paused in the headlights, his head turning sharply in surprise, then he broke into a jog and disappeared into the trees. The memory of him is imprinted on my brain –the dark brown fur on his back, the lighter fur on his chest, the long hairy arms, the sharply tilted forehead and the row of pointed teeth he flashed at me when he snarled.
> Frank woke when I opened the car door and the lights inside went on. He came out and stood beside me as I peered into the trees, listening to the bushes snap as the sasquatch made his getaway. (315)

This brief encounter provokes a further search for that elusive identity that necessitated her liminality in the first place. She is comforted from her despair with the thought that "magical things were still living in the world" (316). In the present of the plot's bitemporality, Lisa tells us more about sasquatches:

> Most sightings of this shy creature are of single males, but B'gwus is part of a larger social complex, complete with its own clans, stories and wars. There are rumours that they killed themselves off, fighting over some unfathomable cause. Other reports say they starved to death near the turn of the century, after a decade of horrific winters. A variation of this rumour says that they were infected with TB and smallpox, but managed to survive by leaving the victims to die in the woods. They are no longer sighted, no longer make dashes into villages to carry off women and children, because they avoid disease-ridden humans. (318)

Her attempt to portray sasquatches as victims of an unknown or unclear pogrom who now use elusiveness as a shield for self-protection is indicative of a desire to embrace their mythic reality as a form of minority identity. She eventually attains some maturation in her return to Kitaamat and embraces her altered reality. Her search for sasquatches attunes her with the crows, taking the place of the "little man." When Jimmy goes missing, it is the crows that inform Lisa, in Haisla, to "Go down to the bottom of the ocean" (1), thus prompting her search for Jimmy, transformed by the narrative into a symbolic sasquatch. In this search, she embraces the old order, the supernatural and mythic realm, and makes a deal with the ghosts.

Lisa's acceptance of the supernatural realm through her symbolic deal with the ghosts of Monkey Beach takes her to the second realm that insinuated itself into her conception of reality. In this realm, she sees Ma-ma-oo, Mick, Ba-ba-oo, and Jimmy. This reconciliation of one world with the other allows Lisa to leave her liminal space. She finally finds the missing link in her reality, and the story ends with a suggestion that the elusive sasquatch, symbolic of missing identity, is "Close, very close" (374).

The search for this elusive identity enables Lisa to resist the appearance of things, and by extension, resistance to domination. Like Azaro in Okri's *The Famished Road*, Lisa chooses to remain in her liminal space as a way of dealing with her quest for identity. Her search for the sasquatches, and indeed for the missing identity, is

important in the way it articulates a collective loss of identity in a "modernizing" world. Despite the erosion of the cultural, mythic, and oral nature of Haisla culture by the forces of colonialism and nationalism, Lisa's reality is colored by the unresolved past of First Nations' subjugation, marginality, and subalternity. The "I" in the novel, as JanMohamed and Lloyd suggest, is the collective voice and has a "positive transformative capacity" (11). This "I" is used to code resistance in its defiance of singular reality as well as its performance of resistance in situations of dominance, such as Lisa's confrontation with the three guys who harass her and Erica (250-251).

Both Azaro and Lisa resist dominance by their acceptance of liminality. As child narrators, they are at subaltern positions in relation to the adults in the novels. However, they also perform resistance by rejecting any singular reality. Caught between the incomplete transition from the old mythic and oral world to a modern society that deprives them of complete agency, they identify with their liminal spaces in order to inscribe their identities. In the case of Azaro, this identity manifests in his choice to remain on the liminal road between the pristine river of the past and the overbearing reality of the present. His decision not to conform foregrounds a performance of resistance and I argue that this resistance correlates with the Niger Delta minority discourse. I read Azaro's conception of reality as a reflection of the liminality of the people of the Niger Delta, especially Okri's Urhobo people, who are caught in the current of asymmetrical nationalism, neocolonialism, and the desecration of their environment and homeland by the agents of the Nigerian state and oil multinationals.

On the other hand, Lisa's liminality comes from her choice to rediscover an elusive identity that is buried in the past, symbolically consecrated by Ma-ma-oo's death. In the text's present bitemporality, the search for Jimmy merges with a subtext of the search for sasquatches and both articulate Lisa's search for an identity beyond normal cognition. The very presence of a bitemporal plot foregrounds the novel's liminal space; the past constantly insinuates itself into Lisa's presence, both in the first and second temporal spaces of the plot. The pull of her liminal space comes from Haisla mythic force and Mick-inflected American Indian radicality. In accepting the mythic world, she resists singularity and inscribes marginality into any homogenous conception of Canada as a nation.

Both Okri and Robinson use the postcolonial Bildungsroman to narrate "the experience of historically marginalized peoples" (Slaughter 1411). This corresponds to Slaughter's assertion that the Bildungsroman provides "normative literary technology by which social outsiders narrate affirmative claims for inclusion in the franchise of the nation-state" (1411). Beyond its usefulness in exploring the construction of minority identity, the child narrators we find in both novels also demonstrate resistive impulse through their

constructions of mythic reality, and this foregrounds their agential roles in how the novelists resist the coloniality of the nation and modernity. Okri and Robinson have used their child narrators to articulate and inscribe marginality in the context of Nigeria and Canada, and by their affirmation of minority identity, they establish the modalities through which the postcolonial bildungsroman can be used for self-inscription.

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