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“A LOSS SO FINE IT PIERCED MY HEART.”
LOST LANGUAGES AND CULTURAL IDENTITY IN
HIROMI GOTO’S *CHORUS OF MUSHROOMS*
AND EDEN ROBINSON’S *MONKEY BEACH*

Résumé : Bien que *Chorus of Mushrooms* d’Hiromi Goto et *Monkey Beach* d’Eden Robinson aient été écrits par deux auteurs évoluant dans des contextes ethniques et sociaux différents, les deux romans partagent le thème commun, celui de la perte de la langue ancestrale dans les textes des protagonistes. Dans *Chorus of Mushrooms*, les parents japonais immigrants de Muriel, ou Murasaki, construisent l’identité de toute la famille sur le rejet de la langue et de la culture japonaises ; dans *Monkey Beach*, la communauté de Haisla des Premières nations de Kitamaat où vivent la protagoniste Lisamarie Hill et sa famille, s’est presque entièrement occidentalisée et pratiquement plus personne ne parle le Haisla. Étonnement, dans les deux romans, la langue ancestrale peut être considérée comme moyen d’accéder à la véritable identité des protagonistes, comme une traduction de la tradition vers l’anglais ; ce qui ne s’avère être qu’une traduction approximative, loin de suffire à transmettre les complexités de leurs cultures respectives des non-Blancs. L’article est consacré à la question de la perte des langues et à leur rôle de porteurs de l’identité ethnique et culturelle dans *Chorus of Mushrooms* et *Monkey Beach*. L’auteur de l’article interroge la neutralité supposée de l’anglais ainsi que l’insuffisance des théories occidentales dans l’étude des textes des auteurs non-Blancs : tandis que l’anglais peut être, comme l’aurait dit Lacan, un fondement d’accès au droit du père (blanc), les langues ancestrales dans les romans de Goto et de Robinson se transmettent par l’intermédiaire des grand-mères des protagonistes. L’auteur analyse également l’importance des langues et des cultures ancestrales pour les familles / communautés dans lesquelles les personnages vivent.

In the present day and age, it might be a truism to state that language is not simply a neutral, transparent medium used in order to communicate or that the particular language spoken (be it English, French or any other linguistic system) may serve as an important tool in shaping one’s view of the world. As Bill Ashcroft writes in his *Post-Colonial Transformation*, “[t]o have a

language is to have a particular kind of world, a world that is simply not communicable in any other language” (59). Admittedly, Ashcroft’s further reasoning deconstructs this statement to a degree, emphasising that differences in the perception of the world exist even between speakers of the same language, and that there is also a viable possibility of cross-cultural communication (61–78)¹. Even so, imposition of one linguistic system over the other (ones) – as the case has frequently been, and continues to be, between colonisers and the colonised – might prevent the transmission of certain areas of meaning from the language (and culture) of the person or group made to use the dominant language. In a study of world’s disappearing languages and the impact thereof on human knowledge, K. David Harrison, a sociolinguist, writes that languages “have adapted over time to serve the needs of a particular population in their environment. They have been shaped by people to serve as repositories for cultural knowledge, efficiently packaged and readily transmittable across generations” (7). He further claims that “[l]anguage disappearance is an erosion or extinction of ideas, of ways of knowing, and ways of talking about the world and human experience” (7). Indeed, any given language both grows out of a particular culture and can be seen to act as its transmitter, the medium which carries stories, myths, legends, as well as explains customs.

According to the Official Languages Act (passed in 1985), in Canada there are two languages– that is, English and French – that hold the official nationwide status, and “have equality of status and equal rights and privileges as to their use in all institutions of the Parliament and government of Canada” (Official Languages Act, <http://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca> DOA Aug 2 2013). However, these are far from the only languages spoken in Canada. In the 2011 National Household Survey, over six and a half million Canadian citizens named a language different from these two as their mother tongue, while over four hundred thousand Canadians admitted to perceiving more than one language (e.g. English or French and a non-official language) as their mother tongue (Statistics Canada <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca> DOA Aug 2 2013). In fact, the survey participants have named more than a hundred specific languages, in addition to the more general categories, such as “Aboriginal languages” or “Indo-Iranian languages,” that they speak at home. Given that Canada prides itself on being a multicultural country, open to various instances of cultural diversity, the fact that it only has two official languages may in itself preclude expressions of certain forms of difference.

Moreover, despite the official equal status of English and French, the position of French remains inferior to that of English, with the former being

¹ Similar arguments can be also found in Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin’s *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literature* (37–76).

spoken by only about ten million of Canadian population, predominantly in Quebec (Statistics Canada <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca> DOA Aug 2 2013). Thus, in Canada, English constitutes the language of majority, entangled in past and present colonising implications. In most Canadian provinces, it remains the standard to which the immigrants and minorities, such as First Nations inhabitants of Canada, have to conform. In literature as well, a given author's decision to write and publish in English involves a kind of a double-bind: it potentially allows the text to reach a wider audience, but despite the possibility of creative, transformative usage, it may remain an oppressive (non)choice.

In the present article, I seek to analyse the issue of language loss and the implications thereof for the cultural identity of the protagonists in Hiromi Goto's *Chorus of Mushrooms* (1994) and Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach* (2000). At a cursory glance, the books may seem not to have much in common: the author of the former immigrated to Canada from Japan as a child, and the writer of the latter is a member of Haisla and Heiltsuk First Nations, and the protagonists share the respective authors' ethnic and cultural backgrounds. However, it should be noted that both books have been written in the mode of magic realism, and both are set in specific locations in contemporary Canada, with *Chorus of Mushrooms* taking place in Nanton and Calgary in Alberta, and *Monkey Beach* in Kitamaat and Vancouver in British Columbia. The juxtaposition of the two texts reveals a number of similarities with regard to the themes of the novels: in both cases, the protagonists are young women growing into their cultural identity that is arguably contingent on family relations and personal choice as much as it is on the colonising practices of the state of Canada. For the purposes of this article, it is the issue of the loss of ancestral languages that is considered key for the protagonists' negotiating and fashioning their postcolonial identities.

I begin my considerations by examining the notion of language loss in Goto's *Chorus of Mushrooms*, before moving on to analyse Robinson's *Monkey Beach*. Subsequently, I juxtapose the two texts, discussing the similarities revealed by a reading focused on the notions related to the subject of language loss. Throughout my interpretation, I attempt to be mindful of the cultural differences between the authors of the two novels under analysis and myself as a white European, as well as between the two authors as members of very different ethnic groups. My aim is not to equate the general situation of Japanese Canadians with that of members of First Nations in Canada, but, rather, to draw parallels between the two cases presented in these particular books.

The protagonist of Hiromi Goto's *Chorus of Mushrooms*, Muriel (named so by her parents, and later assuming the name “Murasaki”), lives with her parents and grandmother, Japanese immigrants to Canada, in a house located in the prairie town of Nanton, Alberta, next to the family's mushroom farm. Muriel

grows in a household where, due to the choice of her mother, made in order for the family to “fit more smoothly with the crowd” as immigrants (Goto 207), she is only supposed to speak English, consume “Canadian” food and indulge in Western culture. However, another ontological option for a Japanese Canadian person living in Canada is offered to Muriel by her grandmother Naoe, referred to as Obāchan, who refuses to conform to her daughter’s wishes regarding the “appropriate” language for the family to use in the new country. Spending her days in an armchair in the corridor of the house, Obāchan rebels by constantly talking, muttering and singing in Japanese (e.g. 3–5, 21, 93–94). Moreover, she privately renames her granddaughter “Murasaki,” in a gesture that attempts to bring the girl closer to her Japanese ancestry (15). While the two share a close bond, they are unable to talk with each other: Murasaki only learns Japanese when she is an adult, a time after Naoe has mysteriously disappeared into Canadian winter, never to be seen by the family again (79–89). Puzzlingly, following that event Murasaki and Naoe conduct what can be termed telepathic conversations “over distance and time” (130), in which they are able to understand each other despite the linguistic barrier.

As Mark Libin remarks, “[t]he longing to translate is articulated from the beginning by Goto’s narrator” (123). Indeed, on several occasions throughout the novel, Murasaki can be seen to express her acute discomfort with her parents imposing upon her the English language. As she says at one point, “[she] wasn’t given the chance to choose. [She] feel[s] a lot of bitterness about how [she] was raised, how [she] was taught to behave. [She] had a lot of questions about [her] heritage, but they were never answered” (Goto 189). Her difficulty in determining her cultural identity thus seems directly related to her mother’s insistence that the family speak no Japanese. Conscious though she has always been of her ethnic identification – or, at the very least, conscious enough to insist, as a child, that she is “NOT CHINESE” (53, capital letters in the original) – Murasaki remains confused as to what being Japanese might entail. This is only exacerbated by her mother’s reactions to the possibility of Murasaki becoming more visibly other in Canadian society, as, for instance, when the girl accidentally stains her hands yellow from mandarin oranges (92). However, it should be noted that the parents’ rejection of the Japanese language and culture results in a rift within the Tonkatsu family. The grandmother, Naoe, cannot talk with anyone at home, as they either refuse to or cannot speak Japanese; therefore, she feels resentment towards her daughter, whom she blames for the situation. Tellingly, she refers to Keiko / Kay as “[a] child from [her] heart, a child from [her] body, but not from [her] mouth” (48) and “a daughter who has forsaken identity” (13). Conversely, Shinji/ Sam, Murasaki’s father, claims that the consequence of his initial complete repressing Japanese was that he has entirely lost the ability to form Japanese words. Referring to his wife’s and his decision not to use Japanese in Canada, Sam tells his daughter that “[he] was

ashamed. [He] felt a loss so fine it pierced [his] heart” and that he felt like “half a person” (207), thus not wanting to speak at all, and growing into a largely silent man. It is only after some time that he has discovered his paradoxical ability to read in Japanese, although, as he reflects, at the point “it was too late for [Keiko]. And it was too late for [Murasaki]” to (re)claim their Japanese identities (208). Therefore, it is the trauma resulting from Sam’s rejection of his mother tongue that can be seen as largely responsible for the difficulties in his relationship with his daughter, who has regarded him as absent and unwilling to communicate with her.

In contrast to her husband, Keiko / Kay declares overtly that she has had “a happy and easy life” as an immigrant in Canada due to her decision “to be at home in [her] new country” (189). However, Keiko’s extreme reactions in situations such as the aforementioned incident with Murasaki colouring her hands yellow reveal her deep insecurity about her (and her family’s) place in Canadian society, suggesting that despite her efforts she still does not feel quite comfortable as a Canadian. Indeed, the force of the crisis stemming from Keiko’s discarding of her Japanese identity is revealed only after Naoe’s going missing. At this point, it is Keiko who refuses to speak any language at all and, unable to verbalise her loss, descends into a near-catatonic state (127–129).

Although the issue of language comes to the fore in *Chorus of Mushrooms*, Goto’s narrative emphasises that communication and connection are also achievable through non-verbal cultural practices and gestures. One example of this is a key scene of the novel, in which Murasaki and her parents share their first family dinner of Japanese food. Prepared by Murasaki, the main dish bears the same name as the family does, “tonkatsu,” a coincidence the protagonist cannot stop thinking about (150). In his reading of the novel, Libin suggests that this word “becomes (...) the lever with which Muriel is able to recover her forgotten language” (124). Importantly, the family dinner, which turns out to be the first step in healing the wound of cultural loss for Murasaki and her parents, takes place in almost complete silence, undisturbed by either English or Japanese (Goto 152–153). Moreover, the female characters are also shown as being connected by a variety of intimate gestures, such as cleaning a daughter’s ears by her mother (154–157), that seem to suggest that speech is unnecessary in forming a close bond. However, when a verbal explanation behind such practices is missing, they may be misunderstood: for example, *sekihan*, a meal which Naoe prepares for Murasaki when the girl first menstruates, turns out to be a dish served to celebrate other significant occasions as well and not, as the protagonist has assumed, something “for women only” (182). Thus, while certain elements of a culture might have the potential to be transmitted wordlessly, a cross-cultural reproduction thereof may not always result in the same meaning.

As an adult, Murasaki is able to use both English and Japanese, and, indeed, she shifts freely between the languages in her conversations and storytelling; moreover, in the story Murasaki narrates, so does her grandmother. The younger protagonist is well aware that she straddles the gap between two linguistic systems; as she states, “[she is] glad [she] learned Japanese because now [she] can juggle two languages and if there isn’t one word in English, it will be there in Japanese and if there’s something lacking in [her grandmother’s] tongue, [she will] reach for it in English” (54). This potential is also reflected in the linguistic layer of the text itself: in *Chorus of Mushrooms*, English is interspersed with Japanese phrases and sentences, usually left untranslated. It ought to be noted that while in such a way Goto can be seen to play tricks on her readers, language plays tricks also on her protagonists. At certain points both Murasaki and Naoe are startled to hear that the conversations they have been having for the duration of the novel (with the former’s lover, and the latter’s companion – a scholar/cowboy nicknamed Tengu) have been conducted entirely in Japanese (187, 197). In consequence, the taken-for-grantedness of language is called into question. As Anna Branach-Kallas suggests in her analysis of the novel, “*Chorus of Mushrooms* interrogates the fixity of cultural boundaries, eroding them subtly and tactically. The novel clearly shows that the act of reading – reading language, reading the other – is risky and always involves misinterpretation” (100). Indeed, the certainty of any kind of communication, be it verbal or relying solely on gestures, becomes deconstructed in Goto’s text through the events experienced by her protagonists². Murasaki’s initial lack of knowledge of Japanese makes it impossible for her to learn from her grandmother about what her ethnic identity might entail; as a result, she needs to acquire that knowledge through trial and error in her adult life. Although when given the opportunity to choose, both Murasaki and Naoe are able to fashion for themselves hybrid cultural identities, these remain to a large degree a work in progress, never quite finalised in the novel.

The second book I discuss in the present article, Eden Robinson’s *Monkey Beach*, takes place predominantly in the Haisla community of Kitamaat, at the coast of British Columbia. Following decades of colonising practices carried out first by the European explorers, the church, and then by the Canadian government, the community appears thoroughly westernised³. Everyone in the Kitamaat village

² It should be noted that, according to Katarzyna Marak (2014), in Japanese culture silence, gestures, and body language constitute forms of communication equal to, or even more adequate than speech. Marak also makes note of the paradox of Naoe’s fascination with the power of language and words, given that the protagonist supposedly represents traditional Japanese views in the novel.

³ In *The Sasquatch at Home: Traditional Protocols and Modern Storytelling*, Robinson reveals that she considers herself to be restricted by “Haisla copyright” in her writing, and that she consciously avoids describing certain practices so as not to step out of

speaks English, and all characters bear Western names: from grandmother, Agnes, to Albert, Gladys and Michael in the parents’ generation, to the protagonist, Lisamarie, named after Elvis Presley’s daughter (Robinson, *Monkey* 52), and her brother Jimmy. Given these circumstances, the very awareness of the loss of the community’s original language and cultural knowledge is far from immediate for Lisa. Rather, she gradually arrives at the realisation as she grows older, slowly becoming conscious of the fact that English may not provide her with appropriate tools to understand the world around her.

The issue of the Haisla people possessing their own distinct linguistic system is explicitly addressed in the novel on several occasions. As Lisa explains at one point in the novel, “[t]he language of the people in Kitamaat Village is commonly called Haisla. The actual word for the Haisla language is Xa’islak’ala, to talk in the manner of Xa’isla” (193). The protagonist describes the language as being strikingly different from English: “Haisla has many sounds that don’t exist in English, so it is not possible to spell the words using English conventions” (193). However, as she goes on to add, pronunciation of Haisla words may also be problematic, as “it is difficult for English speakers to learn partly because most English sounds are formed using the front of the mouth, while Haisla uses mainly the back” (193); in order to provide an example, Lisa describes the proper way to pronounce the very word “Xa’isla.”

It ought to be noted that this language, together with the system of beliefs, is grounded in a specific territory inhabited by the Haisla people— a fact that might contribute to the attempts at translation from Haisla to English being difficult, or even futile. Thomas King notes that “[l]and has always been a defining element of Aboriginal culture. Land contains the languages, the stories, and the histories of a people” (199). A corresponding situation can be observed in the case of Robinson’s *Monkey Beach*. Indeed, Agnieszka Rzepa points to the fact that in *Monkey Beach* “[t]he cultural mapping of physical space by means of place names and stories attached to places, as well as the mental mapping of experience as expressed through language, are erased or obscured when ‘translated’ into the language of the dominant culture” (85). As follows, due to her not speaking Haisla, Lisa’s access to the cultural body of knowledge of the Haisla people is undeniably limited.

Similarly to the situation in *Chorus of Mushrooms*, in Robinson’s novel as well it is the grandmother, Agnes, called Ma-ma-oo, who, at least partially, holds the keys to the ancestral culture. Although other characters in the book also engage in various traditional practices, such as fishing for oolichans, a

bounds of her community (Robinson, *Sasquatch* 31–32). While this allows for the possibility of certain events pertaining to Haisla traditions taking place, as it were, off the page of *Monkey Beach*, for the purposes of this article I consider only the information found in the novel itself.

crucial element of the Haisla life (Robinson, *Sasquatch* 20), Ma-ma-oo is the person who speaks Haisla on a regular basis. It is from her that Lisa learns in more detail about her people's customs (concerning matters as diverse as gathering berries and "contacting the dead" [Robinson, *Monkey* 139]) and hears traditional stories. However, as Ma-ma-oo states, "to really understand the old stories (...) [one has] to speak" the language" (Robinson 211). Thus, the translation of tradition into English turns out to be but an approximation, far from sufficient to convey all the intricacies of the Haisla culture. Ma-ma-oo offers to teach Lisa a word of Haisla a day, but, as the girl reflects, "that was only 365 words a year, so [she would] be an old woman by the time [she] could put sentences together" (211). While the protagonist feels discouraged from learning Haisla due to the time it might take, it is arguably rather doubtful that she would be able to speak the language following such a rudimentary course of study, and remaining unaware of the rules of grammar or syntax governing Haisla.

The situation becomes further complicated for Lisa with the death of Ma-ma-oo, as certain pieces of information thus far available to the protagonist are irretrievably lost. This is especially troublesome in light of the fact that Lisa possesses a gift that allows her to "connec[t] with the spirit world, especially (...) to predict hardship or death" (Lane 172) and she is not quite able to figure out the issues connected with it on her own without the knowledge of the Haisla language or traditions. One of the instances in which Lisa finds herself unable to utilise fully her abilities is the very scene that opens the novel. The protagonist hears crows outside her window, seemingly talking to her in Haisla: "*La'es*, they say, *La'es*, *la'es*...*La'es* – Go down to the bottom of the ocean. The word means something else, but I can't remember what," she thinks (Robinson, *Monkey* 1, italics in the original). In this case, her lack of familiarity with Haisla prevents Lisa from understanding a potential message carried by the crows. This can be contrasted with the ending of *Monkey Beach*, where, in a vision, Lisa listens to her dead relatives singing a Haisla song, this time understanding the meaning, an occurrence made possible perhaps by her temporary visit to the spirit world (374), or by having listened to her grandmother's teaching. Yet, while the protagonist has managed to learn from the lessons provided to her by Ma-ma-oo, her knowledge remains limited; while in the last scenes of the novel she manages to make conscious use of her gift and contact the spirit world, she nearly dies in the process (365–374).

Although the narrative clearly problematises the notion of language loss, and signals the issues resulting from it on the level of Lisa's cultural identity, Robinson proposes no clear strategies for reclaiming language by her protagonist. In fact, it can hardly be claimed that by the end of *Monkey Beach* Lisa has achieved an equilibrium in negotiating her First Nations identity in a

thoroughly westernised world. To the contrary, with the death of Ma-ma-oo, it is possible that despite her attempts to do so, the protagonist will not be able to establish a deep relationship with the Haisla traditions.

In comparing Goto’s and Robinson’s texts, a few subjects should be remarked upon, beginning with those of the obviousness of the language loss, and the degree to which the language itself is recoverable within the respective narratives. As has already been mentioned, in *Chorus of Mushrooms* Murasaki’s initial inability and, perhaps more importantly, her mother’s refusal to speak Japanese at home resonate on a very immediate, personal level, as they hinder the inter-family communication and connections. However, it is important to note that in this case, the language loss results from an individual choice that is never described as having been forced upon the Tonkatsu family from the outside, even though it definitely may be tied into a larger socio-cultural discourse surrounding language policies directed at immigrants in countries such as Canada. Moreover, Murasaki is not entirely deprived of opportunities to learn Japanese. While the protagonist’s parents do not teach her the language while she grows up, it remains possible for her to learn it outside home in her later life simply “because [she] want[s] to” (Goto 54). Indeed, despite the fact that Murasaki claims in the opening of the novel that “[her] Japanese is not as good as [her] English” (1–2), it seems that she has a good enough grasp thereof to be able to converse with her lover throughout the book using Japanese only. Thus, it appears that her recovering of the lost ancestral language has been quite successful.

Conversely, in *Monkey Beach*, the process of language loss has been taking place for several generations on the level of the entire community. However, as, due to the common usage of English, daily communication between the Haisla characters is not hindered, the phenomenon is paradoxically difficult to notice, and so it takes Lisamarie some time to realise that certain elements of the world she lives in might be more accurately rendered in Haisla than in English. Yet, unlike Goto’s Murasaki, Lisa is not given a possibility of acquiring Haisla to a degree that would allow her to speak it fluently. As presented in the novel, the protagonist’s only source for learning the language is her aging grandmother, who teaches her merely small bits and pieces of Haisla. Significantly, the language itself is location-specific, limited to a certain area in British Columbia and the small group of people living therein. Lisa’s situation is thus quite different from that of Murasaki, who, should she be unable to learn Japanese in the locations closest to her – Nanton, or Calgary in the Canadian province of Alberta – might still have a chance to go to Japan and acquire the linguistic skills there⁴. Conversely, in *Monkey Beach* Lisa

⁴ Corresponding points can be made with regards to the protagonists’ access to Japanese and Haisla cultures, respectively.

does not seem to have any outside source for learning Haisla. This reflects the reality of acquiring this niche language: according to the current data compiled under the direction of Lewis, Simon, and Fenning in the project *Ethnologue*, although Haisla has been “[t]aught in Kitamaat by University of Northern British Columbia since 1994,” all contemporary fluent speakers of the language are over twenty five years of age (Haisla, www.ethnologue.com DOA Aug 2 2013). The scale utilised in the project suggests this to be symptomatic of the language being in danger of extinction, especially given that the people familiar with it tend to speak English rather than Haisla with increasing frequency. Thus, just as it is described in Robinson’s book, the language seems to be threatened with disappearance.

Another problem worth drawing attention to is the fact that in both *Chorus of Mushrooms* and *Monkey Beach*, it is the protagonists’ grandmothers who can be deemed the guardians of the respective ancestral cultures. This is particularly curious when contrasted with the approach of Western philosophy to the notion of language as a masculinised matter, be it Jacques Lacan connecting it with the “Name-of-the-father”, or Julia Kristeva, distinguishing between the female semiotic and the male symbolic order, with structured language belonging to the latter category (21-36). In the two texts under discussion, it is precisely the female protagonists who concern themselves with learning and passing on the respective languages. Given the ambiguous approach of the parent generation to the subject of language in the respective books, neither Japanese nor Haisla can be termed precisely the *father*’s domain. Rather, it is the *grandmothers* who have the largest access to and command of the language, and indeed, to a degree, both Ma-ma-oo and Obāchan may be said to epitomise the respective ancestral languages within the space of the novels. As previously stated, Ma-ma-oo constitutes the only character in *Monkey Beach* who uses Haisla on a regular basis, for instance in a scene when she sings a song that commemorates the family dead to Lisa (Robinson, *Monkey* 174). Similarly, Naoe is the only person in the Tonkatsu family to speak Japanese in Murasaki’s childhood years, and she remains vehemently opposed to using English, despite claiming to understand the language (Goto 4). However, neither can be said to constitute a paragon of cultural purity: Obāchan eventually becomes a participant of the Calgary Stampede, a hallmark Canadian event of the culture of western (215–219), while Ma-ma-oo devours soap operas (e.g. Robinson, *Monkey* 188). These occurrences might be read as evidences of the double-edged working of cultural exchange. As Bill Ashcroft argues, such appropriation of cultural capital by the colonial subjects can have empowering effects, and it may result in productive transformations (58).

As follows from the discussion regarding the protagonists’ grandmothers, a parallel may be drawn between the behaviours of Murasaki’s and

Lisamarie’s mothers. Whereas Obāchan and Ma-ma-oo provide their granddaughters with access to their native cultures, Keiko and Gladys function somewhat as barriers in the process. Keiko’s rejection of Japanese language and culture, as well as her eventual crisis deriving from that fact, have already been described in this article. In contrast, Gladys does not seem to turn her back on the Haisla traditions quite so readily; when Lisa is a child, her mother still follows some Haisla customs, for instance suggesting at one point that her daughter “be polite and introduce [her]self to the water” in the river (112). However, as Lisa grows up, her parents may be seen to, as Coral Ann Howells puts it, be “eager to (...) embrace modern secular views” (192), which may be exemplified by a scene in which they “take Lisa to visit a white female psychiatrist” (192), who is supposed to help the girl with some issues arising from her connection to the spirit world. Yet, as Lisa knows from her grandmother, she has inherited her “gift” from “her mother’s side of the family” (Robinson, *Monkey* 153), and her mother displayed it herself when she was younger. Thus, Gladys’ refusal to help her daughter to understand her cultural ancestry – as well as to admit that she possesses, or used to possess, similar abilities herself (154) – may be perceived as a kind of betrayal towards both Lisamarie and the Haisla culture. Perhaps paradoxically however, while in both *Chorus of Mushrooms* and *Monkey Beach* the protagonists’ parents are described as largely disconnected from their ancestral cultures, it is the Tonkatsu family who experience ontological crises stemming from this source – despite the fact that their rejection of Japanese was their own decision. Arguably, in the case of Lisamarie’s parents in *Monkey Beach*, the lack of such a crisis might be ascribed to the fact that they live in a Haisla community and, in spite of the overwhelming presence of English and western culture in their lives, never fully discard Haisla customs. Moreover, while characters portrayed in both novels live in certain isolation, in Robinson’s novel this pertains to the entire community of Kitamaat, and not just Lisamarie’s family, as it is in the case of Murasaki and her immigrant parents.

Additionally, it may be noted that although both protagonists perceive the inability to speak the respective ancestral language and the resultant lack of access to cultural knowledge in a negative manner, in both their experiences there exists also an undercurrent of anxiety regarding their ancestral cultures. In Lisa’s case, her connection with the Haisla traditions through the means of her gift on occasion puts her even in danger of losing her life, and the messages she receives from the spirit world remain vague and disconcerting (e.g. Robinson, *Monkey* 221–230). For Murasaki, learning Japanese and acquainting herself with her cultural heritage means not only becoming closer to her (lost) grandmother, but also straying off the path chosen by her mother, and, as a result, consciously becoming the Other in the immigrant country. Moreover, it could be argued that as much as Obāchan positively epitomises

Japanese identity, she also represents the dangers of being perceived as (if not becoming) too different from what is seen as the norm. Thus, both Murasaki's and Lisa's quest for the better understanding of their respective roots is ripe with uncertainty and confusion.

In this article I have signalled some problems resulting from the loss of language for the protagonists of Hiromi Goto's novels *Chorus of Mushrooms* and Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach*. While the situations depicted in the books differ quite significantly – one portrays a Japanese Canadian daughter of immigrants who have consciously abandoned the language of the mother country, the other describes an inhabitant of a First Nations community that has been undergoing the process of linguistic colonisation for generations – for both protagonists the loss of the respective language results in confusion and uncertainty with regard to their cultural identities. However, while Muriel / Murasaki manages to re-claim Japanese and negotiate for herself an identity between Japanese and English, a corresponding success is not possible for Lisa, who has fewer possibilities of access to Haisla or knowledge about her people's customs, especially following her grandmother's death. Notably, both novels are written predominantly in English, and even Goto's inclusion of Japanese passages and phrases into *Chorus of Mushrooms* does not preclude an English-speaking reader from understanding the text. As a result, in these two cases the dominant language of the white majority comes to be used to investigate the imposition of English over the languages of immigrants and the Aboriginal minority in Canada. At the same time, as it may be gathered from analyses conducted by critics such as Mark Libin, writing about *Chorus of Mushrooms*, and Coral Ann Howells, with regards to *Monkey Beach* (185–188), narrative devices and conventions in both books fluctuate between those more commonly associated with English-language literature written by white authors and those stemming from the authors' (and their protagonists') respective cultures. It is, therefore, worth considering the two novels as examples of the very process of productive transformation mentioned previously in this article. Eva Darias Beautell refers to a similarly productive process in relation to *Chorus of Mushrooms*, stating in her analysis that “[i]t is (...) indicative that, in order to be liberating, that is, in order to avoid new forms of cultural colonization and/or discrimination, (...) movements across cultures and languages must be multidirectional” (29). Such a movement might be, arguably, seen quite clearly as one of the outcomes of *Chorus of Mushrooms*, realised through both Murasaki's arrival at her Japanese / English-Canadian identity, and through the exploits of Naoe. In the case of *Monkey Beach*, however, a similar goal seems unattainable despite Lisamarie's efforts, and the outcome of the novel in that and other respects remains unequivocal.

In the words of Frantz Fanon, “[t]o speak a language is to take on a world, a culture” (Fanon in Ashcroft 58). As the presented analysis suggests, to lose a language may mean to arrive at ontological uncertainty stemming from the loss of one’s cultural identity, the access to myths and stories of the given culture, ancestral knowledge, as well as disturbances in family connections. While language is not the only possible means of communication and transferring cultural knowledge, the disappearance of a particular linguistic system may be seen as a loss of a particular kind of understanding the world, even if other linguistic options remain available.

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