



Perpetual Traps in Canada's Multiculturalism Policy: An examination of Eden  
Robinson's "Traplins"

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Eden Robinson's "Traplins" (1996) is a story that examines the challenges in breaking the social status quo without further harming those in Canada who are caught within its restrictive grasp. The story gives readers a snapshot of a town in Northern BC in the 1990s. Through honest, ungarnished storytelling, Robinson examines the realities of two distinct communities within the town, each affected very differently by their colonial past. Robinson describes an arguably well-intentioned white couple who wishes to "save" the main character from his disadvantaged circumstances. Symbolically, however, they neglect to confer with him when determining how best to help, and ultimately undermine their relationship with him. I will examine, in juxtaposition with Robinson's story, the idea of multiculturalism in Canada and how this "well-intentioned" policy affects Aboriginal sovereignty. The forceful and inappropriate actions of the couple in Robinson's "Traplins" parallels the recognition that Canadian multiculturalism is less an inclusive ideology than "an example of public policy that has served to undermine Aboriginal sovereignty" (St. Denis, 2011, p. 309). In 1971, Pierre Trudeau, Canada's then Prime Minister, introduced the Multiculturalism Policy, and it became an official act in 1988. But many within Canada's Aboriginal communities worry that the blanket of multiculturalism, cast over all of Canada's minority groups, works to trivialize and deflect from Aboriginal perspectives on Canada's history and Aboriginal People's consequent rights today. The title of Robinson's "Traplins" represents the difficulty Aboriginal people face in the persistent grasp of colonialism, while her writing style, both in this story and in further publications, defies demands for a racialized minority perspective imposed by the colonial extension of multiculturalism.

Robinson's story begins with a father and his son engaged in the long-held cultural practice of traplining. The success of this trip promises a happy return home, but the story is quickly complicated by the revelation of the substance abuse, violence, and poverty that permeates the family. Later in the story, Will, the main character, is likened to the flawless white marten that his father collects from the trapline. Will's father wraps the rare and unspoiled marten and stores it separately from the other animals, so as to protect it from their imperfections. The Smythes, an idyllic middle class white couple, see the potential in Will to conform to dominant societal values and want to save him from becoming like others in his community. Will is an innocent and talented young student who has not yet been personally afflicted by substance abuse, but rather needs occasional protection from those who have. While they are in the woods, Will's father tells him, "This is the best time for trapping. [...] This is when the animals are hungry" (Robinson, 1996, p. 3). The trap line offers its prey a gamble at sustenance during the most desperate time of the winter, yet the incentive may be awarded at the expense of their lives. Analogously, the Smythes offer Will the resources to be successful in dominant society, but accepting their help comes at the expense of losing his family, his culture, and his community.

In a 2015 interview with Eden Robinson, Stephanie McKenzie asked the author about the meaning and role of the Smythes. Not only did the couple misjudge and insult Will's family and community, they effectively took away the support that he really needed. The interviewer asked Robinson whether the couple was representative of something and whether they were meant to be "creepy" characters. Robinson responded:

I meant for them to be helpful, but it is creepy. People often come up with solutions to help other people that don't include asking the people who need help what they need. When you impose a solution on someone, the power dynamic is always weird, no matter how good your intentions. You can see the same dynamic all through Canada. Solutions imposed on other people don't often benefit the people they're meant to help. (McKenzie, 2015, para. 17)

Canada's policy of multiculturalism was originally introduced within a bilingual framework, immediately recognizing the two dominant cultures within the country. Its purpose was to help "break down discriminatory attitudes and cultural jealousies" (Government of Canada, 1971). However, in the negotiating of its purpose and implications, the voices of Aboriginal people, those who have always been and continue to be among the primary recipients of discriminatory attitudes in Canada, were left out of the conversation. Some critics accuse the policy of being a "generator of good feeling and manager of painful histories" (Burman, 2016, p. 362) as multiculturalism silently extends the arm of colonial rule. Others call it a "prefix to justify the refusal for an authentic engagement with Aboriginal people, culture and history" (St. Denis, 2011, p. 313). In disagreement, Kymlicka (2012) contends that what critics of the Multiculturalism Policy need to understand is that multiculturalism is not simply "the uncritical celebration of diversity at the expense of addressing grave societal problems," but rather the "pursuit of new relations of democratic citizenship, inspired and constrained by human rights ideals" (p.1). The good intentions of the policy are easy to defend, but it is difficult to understand the democratic nature of the policy, in respect to Canada's First People, when it was passed through a bilingual, bicultural, colonial framework, neglecting the notion of

Aboriginal influence. Robinson's "Traplines" engages readers in the reality of social, political, and economic inequalities that have been created by a normalized colonial history. Will is not consulted regarding the Smythe's attempt to help him; rather, in the course of a one-sided bet, he is told that he should move in with them. "I win, you stay. You win, you stay," he is told by Mr. Smythe as they begin a game of pool, only seconds after the life-changing idea is presented to Will (Robinson, 1996, p. 16). The story serves as an accessible point from which to initiate discussion of the societal problems hindering democracy through the unequal distribution of rights.

In Robinson's "Traplines," as in Canada today, broad notions of good sentiment cannot properly acknowledge and address the complexity of the lingering cultural assumptions preserved by centuries of colonialism. The Smythes genuinely want to help Will improve his life. In determining a solution for him however, they neglect to include him in their discussion of how best to help. Canada too has imposed a policy of multiculturalism that appears honourable in its effort to replace "older forms of ethnic and racial hierarchy with new relations of democratic citizenship" (Kymlicka, 2012, p.1), but it manages also to silence and minimize competing interests within the nation (St. Denis, 2011). While Aboriginal communities suffer some of the same racial tensions and have similarly limited rights to true democratic citizenship as other racialized minority groups in Canada, the sweeping brush of multiculturalism tends to paint over the "the specific and unique location of Aboriginal peoples as Indigenous to this land" (St. Denis, 2011, p. 311). Through Robinson's unique writing style, "Traplines" is one of the first among a succession of stories that helps her readers examine their own assumptions, while she challenges and complicates the progress of multiculturalism practiced through literature.

An interesting feature of much of Robinson's writing is her ambiguity and deliberate removal of cultural markings from her characters (Dobson, 2009). At no point throughout "Traplines" does Robinson explicitly tell her readers that the characters are either white or Aboriginal. Instead, she describes two distinct households: one picture perfect, with roses in the garden, coffee brewing every morning, and documentaries showing on the television; and the other frequently bereft of food, dangerous (depending on who is home), and located in a community far removed from town. The only deliberate labels Robinson affixes to the members of the two communities are "villagers" and "townies," revealing their locations but little else of their differences. This feature of ambiguity in Robinson's writing, Dobson (2009) notes, may frustrate colonial audiences looking within her work for their Native informant. Hoy (as cited in Dobson, 2009) states that in this story, Robinson

seriously damages the capacity of white culture to allocate to itself all that remains after the racial/cultural reserves have been allotted. In so doing she makes 'Native writer' a less constricting designation and helps move us towards a point where the asymmetrical deployment of such categories becomes less pervasive and problematic. (pp. 65-66)

Regardless of her impact in expanding the term, in many interviews Robinson has noted her resistance to being categorised as "Native Writer." This label, Dobson (2009) argues, becomes a fixed point of origin, which, from a colonial perspective, serves to limit Native writers' participation in contemporary life, and their ability to posit self-governance. While some of Robinson's books appear at first glance to be packaged as Native texts, she often makes a deliberate effort to leave her characters' cultural identities more

ambiguous, allowing her readers “to impose their assumption about the sorts of characters that a Native woman would or could write about” (Dobson, 20009, p.60).

In the reality of multiculturalism, many readers of Canadian literature have certain expectations of Indigenous authors and writers of colour. In his analysis of the progress of multiculturalism, Kymlicka (1998) noted that white Canadians “value diversity, but they want to know that this diversity will be expressed within the context of common Canadian institutions, and that it doesn’t entail acceptance of ethnic separatism” (p. 23). Yet separating Canada’s authors into ethnic boxes makes cultural industries’ demands easier to meet. Eden Robinson’s process of “de-specification,” which has persisted throughout her writing, “renders her work, perhaps paradoxically, less culturally specific” (1996, p. 56), and in turn, works within the context of literature, as Day and Sadik argue, to destabilize “the deep structures of colonial discourse” (as cited in St. Denis, 2009, p. 309) on which multiculturalism is dependent. Robinson’s “Traplines” reveals the long and complicated path ahead as Canada learns how to pilot its chosen policy of multiculturalism. The continued history of societal trap lines will persist however, so long as Canada’s normative history refuses to recognize Aboriginal interpretations of history and include Aboriginal voices in the conversation as new policies are forged. Until then there will be a limit to the understanding Canadians have about Aboriginal sovereignty (St. Denis, 2009, p. 309) and a limit to the success we can realize as a truly democratic citizenship.



## References

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