

## **From Stereotypes to Sovereignty: Indigenous Peoples in the Works of Charles de Lint**

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# From Stereotypes to Sovereignty: Indigenous Peoples in the Works of Charles de Lint

WERONIKA ŁASZKIEWICZ

THE PRESENCE OF INDIGENOUS CHARACTERS and traditions in contemporary fantasy fiction penned by non-Indigenous authors is a topic that has recently received much attention due to the controversy surrounding J.K. Rowling's "History of Magic in North America" (published on her website *Pottermore*). The four instalments of Rowling's work present an alternative history of the USA, and include, along with Indigenous magicians, references to the Salem witch trials, the Great War, and Prohibition. As far as Indigenous cultures are concerned, Rowling explains that while some magically gifted Indigenous people became highly respected medicine men, others apparently turned to practices such as sacrificing people to obtain the power of transformation into animals. Thus, Rowling writes, "The legend of the Native American 'skin walker' — an evil witch or wizard that can transform into an animal at will — has its basis in fact" (Rowling). Unsurprisingly, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars and readers quickly expressed their disapproval of Rowling's "reworking" of the Navajo tradition of skin walkers and of her overall treatment of Indigenous cultures. For instance, Alison Flood points out that Rowling appropriated a living tradition in order to use it as any other trope of fantasy fiction, and that she forgot about the diversity of Indigenous societies (Flood). Becky Little adds that by equating Indigenous beliefs with fictional magic and thus trivializing them, Rowling further damages the already difficult position of contemporary Indigenous peoples: "the stereotypes of the 'vanishing Indian,' the magical medicine man, or even the noble savage dehumanize the people they profess to represent" (Little). Claire Fallon suggests that Rowling has been criticized not on the grounds that she — a white British woman — dared to write about Indigenous people (though the Indigenous commentators whom Fallon quotes clearly state that they would rather not see their culture

as part of Rowling's magical world), but because she did not support her work with proper research and instead perpetuated stereotypical images (Fallon). Since these and other readers have harshly criticized Rowling for misrepresenting Indigenous cultures, it can be concluded that what the British writer managed to produce is yet another instance of the artistic simulation of Indigenous presence, which Gerald Vizenor perceives as "the derisive signifiers of manifest manners" (*Native* 5). In other words, while some critics might dismiss fantasy fiction — a genre often criticized for its apparent departure from "realism" — as lacking the power to address and influence real political and social issues, Rowling's fantasy work evidently participates in a central debate of post-colonial studies: it demonstrates how the dominant culture appropriates and reshapes Indigenous traditions and identities according to its own needs and assumptions.

It is vital to study the Indigenous dimensions of contemporary fantasy fiction (created by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous writers) in order to evaluate whether the fiction's treatment of Indigenous cultures contributes to strengthening the cultural simulations condemned by Vizenor, or whether it helps to deconstruct these simulations in popular thought. J.K. Rowling is not the first non-Indigenous author to approach Indigenous traditions and characters, and her failure to do so in a satisfactory way should not automatically discredit other writers. While Vizenor rejects the simulations produced by the dominant white culture, he also argues against the concept of Indigenous identity as based only on traceable and biological affiliation with Indigenous people, and instead postulates "eight native theatres" of identity, which promote inclusion rather than exclusion (*Fugitive* 88). Thus, the categories "native by concession" and "native by creation" offer recognition to non-Indigenous writers who have manifested their interest in Indigenous cultures and written about Indigenous themes (88); Vizenor even calls such writers as Karl May, James Fenimore Cooper, and Gary Snyder "native in a theatre of aesthetics" (89). Thus, while the questions of literary appropriation and misrepresentation cannot and should not be dismissed, it would also be a mistake to reject all non-Indigenous fantasy writers who engage with Indigenous peoples and cultures.

One of the fantasists that has repeatedly introduced Indigenous characters and beliefs into his imaginary worlds is Charles de Lint, a prolific Canadian writer of fantasy novels and short stories, whose works

have so far received less critical attention than they deserve. De Lint's works are categorized as urban fantasy and mythic fiction because many of them are set either in Ottawa or in the fictional city of Newford and reconstruct threads from several mythological traditions, which ultimately coalesce into a sacramental vision of the natural world as a sphere permeated by numinous powers.<sup>1</sup> In light of the criticism surrounding Rowling's "History of Magic" and Vizenor's arguments, the aim of this essay is to survey a selection of de Lint's works in order to demonstrate that while some of his early texts perpetuate stereotypical representations of Indigenous peoples, de Lint eventually moves beyond these stereotypes and gradually develops narratives of empowerment in which Indigenous people reclaim their sovereignty (to use Vizenor's vocabulary). Arguably, such narratives can alter readers' stereotypical perceptions. To support these claims, this essay examines the steady shift in the roles and functions of de Lint's Indigenous protagonists, including their changing position in relation to non-Indigenous heroes. It explores the elements of Indigenous cultures present in his works and analyzes how de Lint reconstructs North American history to present Indigenous sovereignty as indispensable for the well-being of the world.<sup>2</sup>

*Moonheart*, de Lint's second full-length novel (1984), follows the adventures of Sara Kendell and Kieran Foy, who have to deal with an evil ancient force that threatens to destroy both the real world and the magical Otherworld that the protagonists visit to learn about their powers (related to following "the Way"). In spite of several obstacles, Sara and Kieran not only manage to destroy the evil creature, but they also discover new relationships and modes of life. By and large, *Moonheart* is an intriguing synthesis of Welsh legends, Asian spirituality, and North American Indigenous traditions. As far as Welsh sources are concerned, de Lint borrows the motif of a wizard turned into stone, the figure of a stag deity inhabiting the wilderness, and the hero Taliesin whom Sara falls in love with — and who, according to the author's background mythology, traveled to North America in a coracle (166). Asian spirituality (Buddhism and Taoism) reverberates in the description of "the Way," which is presented as a cycle of learning and rebirth (165). Interestingly, the reward for finishing this cycle is one's transfer to a place known as the Summer Country, which is, of course, a location reminiscent of Arthurian legends (Monaghan 433).

References to Indigenous cultures and peoples also appear from the

very beginning of the novel. Much like Rowling, in this early novel de Lint turns Indigenous artefacts, customs, and characters into instances of “the fantastic” within the narrative, which fulfill roles similar to those of staple elements of fantastic world-building: they are embodiments of “the Other” which the protagonists need to discover, comprehend, and then deal with by accepting, controlling, or defeating the unknown. At the beginning of the novel, Sara discovers a magical ring hidden in a medicine pouch which also contains objects such as a fox’s paw, corn seeds, and feathers.<sup>3</sup> The medicine pouch — clearly a fantastic artefact for Sara — is then followed by an equally peculiar watercolour picture of a bard sharing a ceremonial pipe with a blue-eyed Indian (7). This curious blending of two cultures underlies much of the novel’s secondary mythology; later it is revealed that the Indigenous characters inhabiting the Otherworld are well-acquainted with the legendary Taliesin and that Indigenous spirits (manitous) — at some point called “Indian elves” (203) — can be approached by “solitary Shaman/bards who were part of no tribe, but yet of all tribes. Like the European bards. Musicians, magic workers, healers” (163). Thus, it can be argued that at this point de Lint, much like Rowling, appropriates elements of Indigenous cultures to present them as something magical and otherworldly. Moreover, while the white protagonists of *Moonheart* live in Ottawa during the 1980s, the Indigenous characters are presented according to the Romantic concept of “the noble savage,” as brave and honourable individuals who inhabit the wilderness of the fantastic Otherworld, dress in animal skins, enact ancient rituals, and are spiritually united with nature. For instance, Ha’kan’ta is first shown as a stoic beauty accompanied by wild animals — the embodiment of a stereotypical Indian princess. Modern Indigenous people fail to make an appearance in the novel, be it in the Otherworld or the real world. Instead, it is the white protagonists who discover the other dimension and explore its potential. And even though for a time they receive spiritual instructions from the magical Indigenous community, in the end the Indigenous characters are largely dependent on the white protagonists for their survival.

Overall, de Lint’s representation of Indigenous characters in *Moonheart* significantly diminishes their presence and agency. In fact, during her visit to the Otherworld, Sara’s lack of knowledge of Indigenous cultures becomes apparent. “I feel like I’m in a remake

of *The Last of the Mohicans*,” she says; “I always loved playing cowboys and Indians when I was a kid” (201). These comments reveal her insensitivity to or ignorance of real Indigenous peoples, and yet they are troublingly in keeping with the novel’s larger portrayal of Indigenous cultures. Indeed, one could argue that de Lint’s Indigenous heroes are token “Indians”: a simulation of real Indigenous presence and a mask created by the dominant culture (Vizenor, *Postindian* 80-81, 85-86). In *Fugitive Poses*, Vizenor argues that “natives are ever and again the national allegories of discoveries, decimation, dispossession, dominance, and tragic victimry” (70). Though in *Moonheart* the Indigenous characters are not decimated by white heroes, their existence is nevertheless relegated to the Otherworld in which they are discovered and overshadowed by the dominant non-Indigenous characters.

However, other elements of the novel redeem, at least to some extent, de Lint’s early attempt at portraying Indigenous people. Though Sara makes some insensitive comments, she and others generally treat the Indigenous characters with respect. At no point in the story are Indigenous characters shown as primitive in comparison to non-Indigenous characters. Nor does de Lint present Indigenous people as damaged by their difficult past and capable only of hatred, which would automatically put them into the role of antagonists. Only one of the Indigenous characters, a war chief, approaches the heroes with hostility. When the embittered chief summons Kieran to battle, another character points out that regardless of one’s reasons, yielding to animosity is destructive and pointless (416). Such a resolution of the conflict is a distant echo of Vizenor’s arguments that tales of native victimry should be substituted by stories of survival, which bestow agency and responsibility on Indigenous people and, therefore, undermine white dominance (*Postindian* 80-81).

Moreover, de Lint presents Indigenous beliefs about the natural world as indispensable for the spiritual growth of his white characters. Kieran and Sara become wiser and more dependable only after they partake of Indigenous wisdom and learn about the mysteries of the wilderness. *Moonheart* (and many other of de Lint’s novels) is generally distrustful of Christianity and institutional religion. Instead, the wilderness is presented as a sacred space, in which humankind can experience a true encounter with the numinous. What is more, at the end of the novel, when the heroes mourn the death of their loved ones, they

are comforted not by priests or God, but by the Indigenous figure of Grandmother Toad (466), who calls Sara her “daughter” (468) and offers the heroes advice and consolation. This scene is one of the many examples in which de Lint shows white characters benefitting from contact with Indigenous spirituality. Other examples include Sara’s friendship with Pukwudji (a trickster spirit) and the implication that the heroes’ magic is linked to “the Great Mother’s spiritual vitality” (206). *Moonheart* clearly engages in an idealization of Indigenous cultures and of white-Indigenous spiritual exchange. As Siobhan Carroll states, “Not only do First Nations spirits recognize the Celtic entity and come to the protagonists’ aid in their struggle against it, but the spirit world is also revealed to be a space shared by creatures from both Celtic and First Nations mythology, just as the space of contemporary Canada is shared by descendants of First Nations and Celtic tribes” (313). Inarguably, de Lint presents Indigenous characters and knowledge as worthy of respect; however, his early work is also guilty of romantic stereotyping and cultural appropriation. Consequently, his Indigenous heroes are more akin to the allegorical simulations identified by Vizenor than to empowered individuals reclaiming their sovereignty.

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to evaluate de Lint’s literary oeuvre on the basis of *Moonheart* alone. De Lint’s subsequent works are characterized not only by the constant reappearance of Indigenous figures and themes, but also by their growing significance and more sensitive portrayal. In the novels published after *Moonheart* — *Yarrow* (1986), *Jack, the Giant Killer* (1987), *Greenmantle* (1988), and *Wolf Moon* (1988) — de Lint continues to include images of the wilderness inhabited by ancient deities and trickster beings, which suggests that they constitute a fundamental element of his writerly imagination. While none of these novels contains prominent Indigenous characters (instead focusing on fairies, werewolves, and gypsies), their minor references to Indigenous spirits and traditions suggest that these themes never left de Lint’s mind, and eventually coalesced into *Svaha* (1989), a post-apocalyptic novel whose protagonist is an Indigenous man.

The blend of traditions present in *Svaha* is even more surprising than the mixture of Welsh/Asian/Indigenous references in *Moonheart*. The novel’s setting is a post-apocalyptic Canada dominated by people of mixed white and Asian descent (de Lint uses a handful of Asian words and traditions). Indigenous people, who in the novel are technologic-

ally superior to other people, have preserved their culture in protected Enclaves. The protagonist, Gahzee Animiki-Waewidum of the Turtle totem — a proud member of the Anishnabeg/Huron Enclave (16) and a *medé* — decides to carry out a mission that will save his community but at the same time turn him into an outcast. Once Gahzee ventures into the world beyond his Enclave, he becomes an *animkwan* — a dog-scout (17). De Lint interweaves Gahzee's adventure with two other plotlines: one follows Lisa who tries to locate a parcel that she was supposed to deliver, and the other focuses on a corporate worker, Yip, who begins to investigate the dealings of the *yakuza* (the Japanese criminal organization that de Lint incorporates into *Svaha's* pseudo-Japanese background). The end of the novel reveals that the three heroes are in pursuit of the same object: a chip containing data about “the Clavers” technology. Although Yip dies, Gahzee and Lisa manage to destroy the chip and save everyone from the *yakuza's* thirst for power.

Introducing Indigenous customs into a post-apocalyptic setting, de Lint portrays Gahzee and the community of the “Anishnabeg/Huron Enclave” through the use of seemingly “traditional” words and practices. For example, Gahzee frequently refers to the manitous, the Sky Woman (101), the spiritual leaders known as the Twisted Hairs, the Medewewin, totem animals, and the belief that all forms of life are united (142-44); he also receives wisdom and consolation from visionary encounters with the Kachina-hey<sup>4</sup> and the stories of his people (114-16). Gahzee is accompanied by a wild coyote whom he names Nanabozho, a reference to the similarly named trickster character of Anishinaabe tradition (Lynch 62) — and perhaps the coyote is indeed a trickster spirit who observes the development of Gahzee's mission, which is vital to the future of his community. The eponymous word “Svaha” is explained as an Amerindian term denoting “the time between seeing the lightning and hearing the thunder; a waiting for promises to be fulfilled” (9). In the context of the novel, the title refers to the period of waiting for a great transformation: the outcome of Gahzee's quest. What is more, the novel provides scenes of tribal ceremonies involving drum music, invocation of spirits, and the sacred act of pipe-smoking (13-15). For all of their technological advancement, the Indigenous characters still wear traditional shirts and leggings (69), and use sweat lodges to purify the body and experience visions. These elements are embedded in a post-apocalyptic setting with its imagery of technological progress, mass



destruction, and ensuing poverty. Scenes in which Gahzee visits a lodge in the Enclave that is full of computers (15-16), wishes for a locally made laser rifle (54), uses martial arts (69), travels through post-apocalyptic desolation on a bike accompanied by a coyote (72), and talks about technologically advanced Indigenous cities (127), are undoubtedly an estranging and amusing synthesis of tribal customs and technology.

Another surprising element is de Lint's subversion and reconstruction of North American Indigenous history, which is the second key feature of *Svaha*. While the Indigenous characters live in relative peace and prosperity in their Enclaves, people outside suffer from the destruction of the natural world and ubiquitous violence. They simultaneously fear "the Clavers" — the embodiment of Otherness — and are jealous of them. Here de Lint offers an ironic reversal of settler-Indigenous history. Historically, it was the white people who forced Indigenous peoples onto reservations, whereas now white society is enraged by the fact that Indigenous communities willingly withdrew from the outside world to protect themselves, thus allowing white people to complete the destruction of their world. In bestowing this form of sovereignty on the fictional Indigenous communities, de Lint offers a provocative revision of the past. According to the back-history in the novel, the Indigenous nations had taken their case to the World Court and managed to reclaim their old lands, which they then turned into Enclaves. All of that was possible thanks to Daniel Hollow Horn, a Lakota musician and descendant of John Hollow Horn (30),<sup>5</sup> who earned millions and used them to educate his people, found laboratories, and hire Indigenous lawyers (31).<sup>6</sup> While Gahzee's people have not forgotten about their tragic past and suffering (29-30), they also remember that they managed to retrieve their dignity and land thanks to their own determination and perseverance. Thus, the fictional communities of de Lint's alternative history are the embodiment of Vizenor's "postindians": people who discarded victimry in favour of "survivance,"<sup>7</sup> and reclaimed their traditional identity, land, and culture in order to change their circumstances and offer the next generation a better life.

Yet, as Gahzee eventually realizes, they achieved only partial success. Having experienced life in the outside world, the protagonist concludes that while the communities protected themselves, because of their withdrawal they failed to protect Mother Earth (52). Thus, de Lint bestows on his Indigenous characters the messianic role of saving the planet

from the destruction wrought by the white man, with Gahzee as the main agent of salvation and restoration. Near the end of his quest the hero announces: "I have come to believe since I left the Enclave . . . that there is but one People and we are all a part of that tribe" (233). He decides that he should become a spiritual leader, "not to teach the tribes. To teach all people" (268). In the end, Gahzee and Lisa decide to use one of the deserted Enclaves to start a new "tribe" that will consist of all people willing to devote themselves to the goal of restoring beauty to the world — a symbolic gesture of racial reconciliation since, as Michelle Reid points out, in *Svaha* "de Lint's Canada disintegrates because space is jealously guarded as a means of preserving distinct racial identities" (424). When the Twisted Hairs appear at the end of the story to instruct Gahzee, it is revealed that only some of them are Indigenous Americans, while others belong to the Masai, Maori, and Soyot people (297). Thus, *Svaha* aptly illustrates the claims made by Marek Oziewicz in *One Earth, One People* (2008) that the future of the world lies in the hands of a unified humanity who will learn cooperation in spite of differences arising from race, religion, and culture (7, 116-77).<sup>8</sup> It is significant that in *Svaha* de Lint bestows a key role in this process of restoration on an Indigenous American man (82-83). Also, the fact that apparently there are no white people among the Twisted Hairs suggests that white people still need to learn about their proper relationship with the rest of the living world.

In contrast with the one-dimensional Indigenous characters of *Moonheart*, Gahzee is a much more believable hero, because he is not another example of a "noble savage" whose behaviour is an enactment of sentimental stereotypes. Although Gahzee's actions and decisions are plausibly embedded in the dictates of his culture, he undergoes a psychological transformation which involves transgressing the laws of his tribe in order to save the group — an act which establishes him as an independent individual, not a generic one. Gahzee's transformation begins when he decides to become an outcast to protect his community. Given the immense importance of community in the life of Indigenous people, de Lint's decision to deprive Gahzee of his community doubles the protagonist's Otherness: Gahzee is now a stranger to everyone. Not surprisingly, it is this new position that enables him to move beyond his distrust of people outside the Enclaves and to reject his tribe's withdrawal from the world. Eventually, he decides to establish

a community in which race ceases to separate people. Naturally, this decision is treated by some members of his community as a violation of tradition and experience (299), but the validity of Gazhee's judgment is confirmed when he receives the approval of the Twisted Hairs. *Svaha* thus suggests that stories of victimry — which dwell on blaming the white man and therefore deprive Indigenous people of responsibility (Vizenor, *Native* 13) — should be replaced by an individual determination to move beyond the trauma of the past to build a better future. As in *Moonheart*, the possibility of a reconciliation of opposing sides is confirmed by the romantic union of the protagonists, Gahzee and Lisa, as well as by Lisa's encounters with Indigenous spirits in the Dreamtime and her genuine sharing of Gahzee's ideals. Yet in contrast to the balance of power in *Moonheart*, though Lisa's presence is crucial to the success of Gahzee's mission, *Svaha* clearly promotes Indigenous agency and autonomy.

Though *Svaha* has the most Indigenous content of de Lint's earlier works, the presence of Indigenous themes, traditions, and figures consolidates in subsequent narratives. *Spiritwalk* (1992), a collection of stories that revisit the characters of *Moonheart*, touches upon Indigenous concerns and includes several Indigenous characters. For instance, the story "Ascian in Rose" features fairies led by an evil woodwife, whom de Lint introduces in the following way: "There was a Faerie holt at the northeast end of Gatineau Park's Lac la Pêche, a small wood sacred to the native manitou that immigrating Faerie had named Rathbabbh and taken for their own" (52). The author implies that the theft of land was a universal problem which affected not only First Nations, but also their spirit world. In "Westlin Wind," after the protagonist's spirit is separated from her body, it drifts to the Otherworld where a shaman — Migizi of the Black Duck totem — shows her a path to the afterlife. In the last story of *Spiritwalk*, "Ghostwood," the characters are able to win only through their joint efforts and the help of Pukwudji and Coyote (362). De Lint's recurrent inclusion of Indigenous characters in his work is important to his insistence on representing contemporary Canada as a place that is not devoid of Indigenous spirits. In this way, his work counters the trend in Canadian and American literature identified by Renée Bergland to depict Indigenous figures as ghosts in the literary imagination. In "Ghostwood," the non-Indigenous characters, Sara, Taliesin, and Kieran, are assimilated into the Indigenous community

in the Otherworld (186-87). At first glance, the characters' embrace of Indigenous traditions might seem part of the romantic notion that First Nations peoples' connection to the natural world is a more innocent and desirable way of living. However, while de Lint's works hold Indigenous beliefs in high esteem, they do not promote "native wannabes"; instead, his aim is to show that there are different paths to understanding one's place in the world and restoring the world's beauty.

The development of Indigenous themes in de Lint's fiction is best confirmed by his Newford novels: a series of works begun in the early 1990s that are connected by reappearing characters and the fictional city of Newford. Many of these novels feature Indigenous heroes who struggle with questions of identity and heritage, as well as benevolent and malevolent manitous who are threatened by figures from European folktales. The series began with the publication of *The Dreaming Place* in 1990, but I will focus on only a few selected titles here. *Someplace to Be Flying* (1998) is a complex work that revolves around the Animal People and their relationship with the human world. Indigenous stories frequently blur the boundaries between people and animals, and then merge both worlds to highlight their interconnectedness and interdependence (Vizenor, *Native* 10-12). Borrowing from these stories and their hybrid characters, the mythological history developed in *Someplace to Be Flying* reveals that initially the world was inhabited by the corbae (Raven the creator spirit; Maida and Zia known as the Crow Girls), later joined by Coyote and the canid family, and eventually by humankind.<sup>9</sup> In the novel, the mythic beings still inhabit the world, and are soon involved in a quest to find a sacred object known as Raven's pot. The search for the pot is interwoven with stories of individual mortal heroes who become entangled in the matters of the spirit world. Coyote (Cody) is one of the antagonists in this story because he wants to use the pot to restore the world to its state before the creation of humankind. Coyote, the Crow Girls, and others are fascinating characters, because in their portrayal de Lint manages to blend Indigenous myth with believable individuals who have their own idiosyncrasies, dreams, and regrets: while they frequently refer to the mystical medicine land of their origins and to their centuries-long existence (289), they also adapt to modern life and develop their own strategies for survival. Moreover, the novel presents the Indigenous spirit world as the primary numinous realm from which all other representations of the sacred derive: the legend

of the Grail and the tale of Cerridwen's cauldron are said to be derived from the story of Raven's pot (151), just as other traditions are said to be indebted to Indigenous sources (29, 80). The novel's ultimate message is one of mutual sustenance in the interests of global survival: that unless people relinquish their grudges and unite, they will not be able to protect their shared world.

*Forests of the Heart* (2000) repeats the conflict from *Spiritwalk*: European spirits known as the Gentry, who have experienced problems with settling in the New World, now wish to forcefully claim some land from the manitous.<sup>10</sup> Yet the manitous do not intend to go down without a fight. *Forests of the Heart* complements de Lint's previous attempts at incorporating Indigenous themes into his work by including prominent Indigenous heroes — Bettina and Tommy — who offer a glimpse into real-life contemporary issues. Through the character of Bettina San Miguel from New Mexico, whose ancestors are *Indios*, readers learn about the stories of the Tohono O'odham nation and their sacred land, the desert (137). Their presence in the novel shows de Lint moving away from using Indigenous characters as a structural device and portal into a fantastic dimension. While Bettina's stories and their spirit realm are unquestionably fantastic in that they include supernatural powers and entities, de Lint does not present them in the manner of *Moonheart's* Otherworld as something that should be discovered by the white protagonists and serve as their escape from their mundane reality. These stories constitute Bettina's heritage, and as such lend depth and plausibility to the heroine's actions and decisions. By acknowledging them, de Lint creates a heroine who is both a modern woman and an heir to the traditions of her people — traditions that are depicted not as a relic of the past, but as a repository of wisdom to which modern people can relate. *Forests of the Heart* delineates the protagonist's spiritual progression to being able to reclaim her heritage (her identity as a shapeshifter) and partake of its mysteries. Thus, she is one of the strongest Indigenous heroines in de Lint's oeuvre.

The other Indigenous protagonist in the novel, Tommy Raven, draws attention to current issues experienced by Indigenous communities, such as addiction, depression, and suicide among the younger generation (125). Once an addict himself, Tommy eventually promises to devote his life to Beauty: "That everyone had food in their stomach, shelter, knew a few words of kindness — that was his definition of Beauty"

(124). Tommy thus decides to live on his welfare cheques in order to devote all of his time to helping others. At several points in the novel, Tommy critiques non-Indigenous perceptions of Indigenous people. In one scene, for example, Tommy and others travel to his reservation to seek the help of his aunts (who are powerful healers and wise women highly respected in their community). This episode provides a contrast between white people's assumptions about "rez life" and its cruel reality:

Ellie realized that she hadn't really known what to expect when they finally drove into the rez. Not teepees, of course, or even log cabins, but she'd thought it would be more rustic, more indigenous, than what it was: basically a combination of an old suburban housing tract gone to decay, ramshackle unfinished buildings, and a trailer park. Except for a few fancier homes that stood out because of their obvious quality, it was all double-wides and bungalows and aluminum siding, where the walls weren't simply uncovered Black Joe or Styrofoam board insulation.

"You're getting a good view of the place," Tommy said. "It almost looks pretty tonight." (247)

Tommy proceeds to tell Ellie how people on the reservation grow marijuana to make a living (248), how they live in extreme poverty (249), and how children become addicted to sniffing glue and gasoline (249). Though these problems are only signalled and not explored, it is still notable that de Lint incorporates them into his work and gives voice to Indigenous people who are not fashioned as "the fantastic Other."

Nevertheless, while *Forests of the Heart* is respectful in its approach to cultural diversity, de Lint suggests that there are cultural differences in the ways people conceptualize the numinous: "The spirits are out there, but how they appear to us depends on what we bring to them. A shaman might see Old Man Coyote, a priest might see an angel" (211). The implicit message of the novel is that instead of dwelling on differences and cultivating animosity, people should respect the world given to them and cooperate to protect it. This is what the protagonists do: though they come from different backgrounds, they work together to save their shared home from the threat of the monstrous Green Man. The possibility of reconciliation is further affirmed by a romantic relationship: Bettina falls in love with *el lobo* — a spiritual being who originates from European folktales, but who adopted the body of a dead manitou, thus becoming a hybrid creature representing mixed cultures.

Similar figures and ideas appear in de Lint's other Newford novels, which repeatedly promote shared human values such as the importance of community, reverence for the natural world, and an embrace of spirituality. To accomplish this end, the Newford novels present Indigenous spirituality as an important source of global knowledge and guidance for the present.

The novels of Charles de Lint are a testimony not only to his dedication to traditional Indigenous values, but also to his growing recognition of the social and political issues affecting Indigenous communities. Starting with the blatantly stereotypical images delivered in *Moonheart*, over the years the author has managed to develop a more sensitive approach, culminating in the Newford series in which Indigenous characters have ceased to be convenient symbols and plot devices of "the fantastic," and instead contribute to the image of living people in a contemporary world that fuses the mysteries of the numinous with real-world politics. Moreover, de Lint's later novels are populated with characters who learn the importance of mutual respect and cooperation, and define themselves in relation to the spirit world. Accepting the existence of the spirits and demonstrating reverence for the natural world is, in de Lint's fiction, to discover a new depth to life. And, as Christine Mains argues, because of that discovery, de Lint's Otherworld ultimately becomes a multicultural utopia: "The Otherworld is an image of a utopian community not unmarked by the consequences of distance and history, but one able to transcend such consequences" (345).

On the one hand, de Lint's works might never fully disengage from certain stereotypes and could be accused of engaging in what Vizenor calls "cultural nostalgia" (*Fugitive* 38). On the other, the Canadian writer should be recognized for his portrayal of compelling Indigenous characters and for his attempts to make his readers aware of the value of Indigenous traditions to contemporary life. As Helen Young argues, "Considering the question of authorial identity and cultural appropriation through a semiotic lens demonstrates that the core issue is not who moves a sign from one system to another, but how it is done and to what effect. Whoever does the moving, a new significance will be produced by the new context" (161). To illustrate her claim, Young adds that "a Black author is equally capable of writing a stereotypical Black character in a Fantasy world as a White author" (161). Arguably, the works of Charles de Lint offer a counterpoint to the works of Rowling

and other fantasists whose failed renditions present First Nations as fantastic and relegated to the past. With their more sensitive treatment of Indigenous concerns and identities, de Lint's works can help to reinstitute Indigenous presence and agency into fantasy fiction. As such, his later works are an example of how contemporary fantasy, instead of diminishing Indigenous heritage and presence, can — in Young's words — “work to break Fantasy's habits of Whiteness” (160).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Chris Brawley's *Nature and the Numinous in Mythopoeic Fantasy Literature*.

<sup>2</sup> A problematic aspect of de Lint's fiction, of course, is that his representations of Indigenous peoples tend to blur the boundaries between reality and fantasy by featuring Indigenous characters who belong to no particular group or by depicting purely fictional Indigenous communities. On the one hand, such practices can be partially justified by the liberties offered by the genre of speculative fiction and by the author's wish to avoid cultural appropriation. Though *Svaha* borrows certain Anishinaabe names, it is still only an imaginative vision of the future rather than a sociologically and politically valid projection of Canada's fate. The Kickaha tribe appearing in de Lint's Newford series, a fictional community based on the Algonquin language group, grants de Lint more freedom in how he incorporates Indigenous traditions into his narratives (Schellenberg and Switzer). On the other hand, such practices nonetheless raise questions about the simulations of Indigenous presence. Ideally, non-Indigenous writers should be more respectful of Indigenous diversity rather than lump all First Nations together, but that would, of course, require detailed knowledge of a particular community and its traditions. If the writer is for some reason unable to gain such knowledge, his/her choice is either to avoid Indigenous characters altogether or to resort to more fictionalized figures (which can also be successful to some degree if the author avoids romanticized stereotypes and prejudice). While the latter option is not the ideal solution, it is still a step towards changing speculative fiction's default preference for white protagonists.

<sup>3</sup> A similar motif appears in *The Wild Wood* (1994), in which the protagonist, Eithnie, finds a weasel-skin pouch filled with stones, feathers, and the like, which is then identified as a medicine bag (136) whose “fetish magic” will one day take the protagonist's daughter into a faerie realm (204).

<sup>4</sup> According to the *Handbook of Native American Mythology*, kachinas are spirits of the dead that appear in different forms and protect the continuity of life (Bastian 272).

<sup>5</sup> Here de Lint refers to the figure of Chief Daniel Hollow Horn Bear, a prominent Lakota leader (Sprague 31), and the historical event of the sundance performed by Hollow Horn (Greider).

<sup>6</sup> Michelle Reid argues that “The People's ‘step-by-step’ progression from a rich benefactor to complete self-sufficiency seems reductive, as social and technological change rarely occurs so quickly or so smoothly” (432).

<sup>7</sup> According to Vizenor, *survivance* refers to “an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories, not a mere reaction, or survivable name. Native survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, tragedy, and victimry” (*Manifest* vii).

<sup>8</sup> Oziewicz argues that the values necessary for this new humanity can be discovered in



mythopoeic fantasy, which abounds in themes pertaining to humans' place in the world, their responsibilities towards the environment, and the significance of their mythological heritage for their future prosperity (66).

<sup>9</sup> For Raven, Coyote, and Animal People in Indigenous stories, see Bastian 40-41, 76-83, 156-60.

<sup>10</sup> This motif later returns in *Widdershins* (2006), which presents another clash between European fairies and Indigenous spirits instigated by mutual animosity and a desire for vengeance. The conclusion of *Widdershins* also suggests that the cycle of violence and revenge needs to be broken so that both sides can focus on their future.

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