


Rebecca Roanhorse: A mythogothic reading of *Harvest*

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Rebecca Roanhorse's short story *Harvest* appeared in the 2019 *New Suns: A Collection of Stories by People of Color* edited by Nisi Shawl. This story has received little to no critical attention. Roanhorse's story is marked by its recourse to the figure of Deer Woman, a supernatural being common to many stories from Native American oral tradition. In this article, I will explore how myth and the gothic are melded together within the narrative of this short story in what I term the 'mythogothic'. I will demonstrate how the mythogothic is integral to the founding of the shadow selves of the Native American protagonist Tansi. It is Roanhorse's depiction of Tansi and Deer Woman's killing spree that I will maintain challenges the founding myths of North American colonialism.

Contribution: This study contributes to scholarship on the work of author Rebecca Roanhorse and her employment of Native American oral tradition and myth as central to her narratives. It further provides a contribution to Gothic studies in the coining of the term the mythogothic as a tool with which to engage in a critical reading of narratives in which myth acts as a structuring device. Roanhorse's short story *Harvest* has received little scholarly attention and using a gothic theoretical approach in conjunction with Native American scholar Gerald Vizenor's trickster discourse allows for a fresh perspective and critical appreciation of the terror central to the story's subversion of American colonial myth.

Keywords: Rebecca Roanhorse; *Harvest*; mythogothic; Deer Woman; shadow selves.

Introduction

This article will provide a close critical reading of the story *Harvest* by the Native American author Rebecca Roanhorse.¹ This story appears in *New Suns: A Collection of Stories by People of Color* edited by Nisi Shawl (2019). This short story has received little to no critical attention although it is a complex commentary on the clash between colonialist myth and Native American oral traditions. Roanhorse's story is marked by its recourse to the figure of Deer Woman², a mythic being common to many Native American oral stories. I will demonstrate how myth and the gothic are melded together within the narrative of this short story to found, what I term, the shadow selves of the Native American protagonist Tansi. In my argument, I have conjoined the words myth and gothic, to show their fluid interdependence, and in doing so have coined the portmanteau term 'mythogothic'.³ The term mythogothic employs traditional myth as an underpinning trope that merges and intersects with the gothic mode's dark aesthetics. Myth like the gothic is inherently mutable and metamorphoses as history and culture alter, resulting in a fluidity that allows for a destabilisation of accepted conventions, histories, and frameworks of power. Form and meaning alter and are founded 'upon the culture that uses them' so that these new forms can accommodate the cross-blood, shadow selves and mythic oral tradition and 'spirit peoples' of indigenous writers but also allows for an engagement with the Eurocentric gothic world where the supernatural becomes a means to subvert the reality of the rational world (Botting 1996:20). Redding (2014:62) notes that the use of gothic in Native American literature serves to 'reinvigorate... the folktale, legends, rituals, and oral traditions of indigenous... cultures'. Redding's (2014:62) indication that native American myth and the gothic are intertwined, and provides support for my conceptualisation of the mythogothic as a tool to conduct a critical reading of Roanhorse's story.

Rebecca Roanhorse is one of the recent author's working within the genre of speculative fiction who makes use of Native American myth to reinvigorate indigenous identity. I will argue that in her short story *Harvest*, Roanhorse's evocation of the mythical figure of Deer Woman allows for

1.As Rebecca Roanhorse is not an enrolled member of the Ohkay Owingeh, I did not include any tribal affiliation after her name.

2.I have chosen to capitalise Deer Woman as it provides her with the correct sense of a living being and not an object.

3.I have chosen not to capitalise this joined word or the word gothic in this article.

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the play of mythogothic elements that destabilise and challenge the narrative of colonial mythology. Problems might be considered to exist when using Eurocentric philosophical theories; however, I will, during the course of my argument, glancingly reference Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection, and the Freudian uncanny double.⁴ Melding limited Eurocentric theory with that of writer and scholar Gerald Vizenor's (Chippewa) Trickster theory and its mythic time and shadows, I will demonstrate that Roanhorse's indigenous mythogothic disrupts the boundaries of the founding myth of American imperialism, which is accomplished through the murderous actions of Tansi and Deer Woman whom Roanhorse has referred to directly as 'serial killers' (Roanhorse cited in Schoonover 2022:300).

Myth and the gothic

Myth is defined by the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary as a 'purely fictitious narrative usually involving supernatural persons, actions, or events, and embodying some popular idea concerning natural or historical phenomena' (1993:1874). Furthermore, myth is associated with religious belief or ritual and as a misrepresentation of the truth. The linkage between myth and ritual extends the idea that both are false, imaginary, and belong to primitive belief systems and actions. These definitions are representative of Western thought and how language is used to conceive of and enforce a perception of truth and reality. Interrogating Roanhorse's mythic world through the lens of contested myth theories such as those of Jung, Campbell, Kerenyi, or other Western anthropological theorists could be seen to merely perpetuate a narrative of colonial dominance. In contrast to the works of these Western theorists of myth and the dictionary definition, Carolyn Dunn (2023) (Muscogee, Cherokee and Seminole) in her article, 'Deer Woman and the Living Myth of Dreamtime', writes that to define a culture by its 'mythmaking' primitivises its creation stories by calling them 'myths' and by doing this 'automatically, in some circles' connotes them as representing falsehoods. She goes on to add that such a cultural worldview and its foundations emanate from a dominant Western point of view. These stories become othered and looked down upon because they lack scientific or rational veracity. Paula Gunn Allen (1991:7) (Laguna Pueblo) writes that for Native Americans myths inform 'consciousness' because they are 'accounts of actual interchanges with the supernaturals that live within the same environs that humans occupy and interchanges with them ... are part of the fabric of human experience'. In a similar vein, Dunn (2003) writes that 'the existence of the "Little People" is an indisputable fact. In Western thought, the idea of the supernatural's presence as located in reality is unthinkable, irrational and is confined solely in the imagination.' Gunn Allen (1991:5-6) indicates that for 'traditional people, the interaction with animals and supernatural beings exists in actuality'. It is these interchanges

4. I have not adopted a feminist stance in my reading of this story, although such a reading might prove of interest. Still, there resides in any such feminist theoretical exploration the need to move away from or reconsider the application of Eurocentric feminist theoretical positions when engaging with indigenous literature and Native American literature in particular.

that are the 'bedrock of native spirituality' (Gunn Allen 1991:6). Although Allen is referring to the Native American peoples, this idea is also one propounded by the Latina or Chicana writer Gloria Anzaldúa. In her book *Borderlands/La Frontera*, she indicates that her indoctrination by white rationality led her to regard the existence of the 'other world' as mere pagan superstition. She goes on to write that this idea of the supernatural in the everyday is regarded by colonial mentality as fictional and make-believe, and Indians are presented as 'primitive' and having a 'magical mind' because it is one that believes that the world of the spirits or supernatural is just as 'real as physical reality' (1987:37). She scathingly notes that the colonialists 'sanction their own religious rites and sacraments' and present them as the only truth, where other practices or spiritual beliefs are considered cults and are written about as mythologies (1987:37).⁵ Myth, like fantasy, has constantly been dismissed by critics and Rosemary Jackson (1981:181) maintains that both have been considered to represent an 'embrace of madness, irrationality, or barbarism'. Although Jackson's comments are pertinent, they appear to reference Eurocentric responses in the form of 'written mythologies'. The supernatural nature of myth is equally present in the gothic genre, and it seems fairly logical to conjoin these two genres.

The gothic, like myth, is a concept that is difficult to define as it remains an ambivalent and transgressive term with roots in the supernatural that can be seen to closely tie it to myth. The supernatural in the form of the spectral, the ghost, the uncanny, and the double are prevalent in both indigenous oral traditions and Western culture. Eurocentric theorists such as Jacques Derrida and Sigmund Freud have formulated critical discourses apropos the spectre, uncanny and the haunting return of the repressed that furnish a means to critically read Gothic terror and the hidden crimes of the past that can be appropriated into a reading of Native American literature. Although the concept of the Gothic might seem to promote a Western narrative as it is associated with the history of Europe, in contemporary times the Gothic has become more fluid and has moved beyond its location solely within this discourse. As such, Roanhorse's work can be deemed to challenge the Gothic as a genre only employed by primarily white authors, instead, as Madelyn Marie Schoonover notes, Roanhorse 'destabilises preconceived notions about "what gothic is"' (2022:296). As Schoonover rightly indicates, this demands that the understanding of what the category of the gothic entails needs to be revised. Roanhorse uses the malleability of the gothic and its tropes as tools to set up a space where the indigenous confronts and challenges what is known as the American or Frontier Gothic with its 'Indian captivity' theme, which Matthew Sivils indicates represents 'any story, fact or fiction that involves

5. Taking into account Dunn, Gunn Allen and Anzaldúa's criticism of how myth has been employed by colonialists, I realise how loaded the word is. My employment of the word myth is not meant to denigrate, rather it is a grappling with the limitations of words in English. I consider that the supernaturalness attributed to the word myth contains a sense of the spiritual that pre-dates the Christian religion and its belief in a single 'truth'. I have thus chosen to use the term 'myth' when referring to Deer Woman.

the kidnapping of a person by Native Americans. Usually the captive is of European descent', but adds that this abduction could be of other Native Americans (2014:84). He goes on to add that these captivity novels represent 'nothing less than a centuries-long record of the horrors of the American colonial project, and to ignore them is to ignore ... the specters that haunt the American mind' (2014:85). In the frontier gothic, there are accounts of 'horrific violence, of severe physical and mental hardships, and in some cases even of supernatural figures and events' and central to these accounts is the figure of the savage and demonic Indian (Sivils 2014:85, 86). These stories that represented Native Americans as cruel monsters who took pleasure in atrocious acts of violence would lead to the establishment of the myth of America, where brave cowboys and white women triumphed and brought civilisation to an unforgiving wilderness.

Tricksters, seduction and the gothic

Native American authors set out to 'write back' to this colonialist mythic tradition. Although Native American scholar Louis Owens (Choctaw) was inclined to believe that Native American authors were rejecting 'the American Gothic with its haunted, guilt-burdened wilderness' and making 'the Indian the hero of other destinies, other plots' (1992:18), Redding writes that several newer Native American writers deployed and reworked 'gothic tropes' rather than rejecting them as Owens advised (2014:61).⁶ Redding goes on to write that this 'repurposing' of the Gothic sets out to 'expose the racialism' that is firmly embedded in the dominant Eurocentric cultural narrative. Roanhorse's short story confronts the reader with a mythical Native American spiritual being and a human protagonist whose combined gothic violence represents an allegorical writing back to the settler mythology of the United States. In this writing back, Roanhorse combines the gothic with the indigenous oral tradition of Deer Woman. I will argue that the mythic space in Roanhorse's story employs what writer and academic Gerald Vizenor, in his book *The People Named the Chippewa*, refers to as mythic time; a time that belongs to the space between 'tribal experiences and dreams' (Vizenor 1994:3). It is a space in oral tradition where the mythic origins of tribal people are located, and variations of mythic stories exist that 'belong to the imaginative desires of the tribe' (1984:3, 7). According to Vizenor (2009:78), it is the figure of the trickster that wanders through the space of mythic time and is a shadow that floats between words and deeds, and can only be 'understood as a part of a greater whole' in the 'tellings' of oral tradition (Velie 1992:131). The trickster is a complex creation of communal storytelling and the mythical, and cannot be understood outside of the comic discourse that surrounds and creates 'him'.⁷ The trickster in tribal oral tradition is a figure that is never static but alters with every imaginative retelling of a story in which trickster appears.

6. One of these authors was Gerald Vizenor. His novel *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart* (1978) is gothic, picaresque and exceedingly comic and amusing.

7. It is interesting that Vizenor and other scholars always refer to trickster as him, but in Roanhorse's story the trickster is female.

Louis Owens writes that Vizenor employs the figure of the Trickster to 'challenge definitions of the self' and 'the world defined in relation to that self' (1998:142). Vizenor's figure of the Trickster as part of a living oral tradition reveals the 'life giving change and adaptation at the center of traditional tribal identity' (Owens 1992:145). Proposing that the trickster can 'live between the seams' Vizenor sees him as acting as a disruptive figure of transgression who 'plays tricks ... is amoral and has strong appetites, particularly for food and sex; he is footloose, irresponsible and callous', but can also be malevolent and dangerous (Velie 1992:122). The trickster is the first Native cross blood, a shapeshifter who resides in mythical time, which is a time 'separated by years' as it is a 'different sort of time, long past and inaccessible' (Velie 1992:124). As a narrative strategy, trickster discourse works on multiple points of view and a 'cross breeding of genres' in a hybrid discourse that 'transgresses boundaries and explodes mythologies' (Bell 1992:184–185). Betty Louise Bell (Cherokee) indicates that the trickster gains his agency from his 'interaction with the mythical past and fragmented present' in what Vizenor refers to as shadows of tribal remembrance of which the Trickster is an aspect (1992:186). However, trickster resides in a 'nether space' between two cultures, 'without becoming lost in the shadows' (Bell 1992:186–187). I suggest that the protagonist of Roanhorse's story, Tansi, is trapped in this 'nether space' caught 'between two isolated cultures' so that she gets lost in the shadows of self and not-self (Vizenor 1990:187). It is into the seams of this divide that Roanhorse will introduce the trickster figure of Deer Woman.

Mythic punishment

The mythical figure of Deer Woman endures in Native American oral tradition where she is described as assuming the shape of a human woman who seduces men. A being that is both deer and woman and exists in what Kimberley Blaeser (White Earth Nation) has defined as 'the essence of movement in a continuum' (Blaeser cited in Whyte 2018a:130). As a woman she arouses passion in men that they can never escape because they are held in thrall to a being that they cannot possess and, ultimately, this leads to their death. She also punishes men who are guilty of sexual and physical violations of women. Deer Woman is thus a being of power, mystery, and seductiveness; but in her ability to kill, she is also malevolent and scary. Paula Gunn Allen and Joy Harjo (Muscogee Creek) have provided interpretations of the Deer Woman stories. Gunn Allen engages with the punishment that Deer Woman can enact for male sexual aggression, where unregulated sexual desire and straying from kinship is shown to have consequences; whereas in her deer poems, Harjo uses oral tradition and mythic time as sites of resistance to historical injustice. Deer Woman becomes a figure of female independence as a sexually assaulted woman is provided with Deer Woman-like super heroine characteristics in the comic book *Deer Woman: A Vignette* by Elizabeth LaPensée (2015).⁸ This superheroine fights male

8. LaPensée is not an enrolled member of a tribe, but is of Anishinaabe descent.

sexual predators and is a symbol of female strength and courage. In a follow-up volume of stories, *Deer Woman: An Anthology* (2017) edited by LaPensée and Weshoyot Altrive (Tongva), Deer Woman is a figure for the radical engagement with femicides and disappearances of indigenous women.⁹ These tales about women fighting back represent a 21st century writing back to the myth of Deer Woman radically altering what scholar Elaine Jahner, writing in 1994, had indicated were rare tales about encounters between human women and deer spirits (Jahner 1994:169).¹⁰ In Roanhorse's story, the protagonist Tansi will be caught in a mesh of desire and obsession, much like a man, and will be punished for this as well as her integration into the dominant settler culture and myth. Roanhorse's writing back to the Deer Woman story is markedly different in her use of a Native American woman who is punitively punished. Set up as Tansi's shadow self, Deer Woman is a conflictual force who manipulates and drives Tansi into disrupting Eurocentric discourse and its taboos through a violent form of decolonial payback that perhaps, too late, forces Tansi into an acknowledgement of her indigeneity, kinship, and the necessity of affiliation with all Native American woman (Bell 1992:188).

Seduction, death and obsession

Harvest begins in the manner of a Native American oral story with Tansi (2019) saying:

Never fall in love with a Deer Woman. Deer women are wild and without reason. Their lips are soft as evensong, their skin dark as the mysteries of a moonless forest. (p. 271)

The words used to describe the Deer Woman as 'soft as evensong, skin dark as the mysteries of a moonless forest' firmly place Deer Woman as a being that is part of the natural landscape. These phrases are rich and symbolic and connect to the oral tradition establishing an 'inextricable relation between land ... ritual and American Indian women's writing' (Pulitano 2008:46). Yet, the evocation of Deer Woman hints at the disquieting nature this story will assume. The descriptors 'evensong', 'dark' and 'moonless' have tenebrous gothic overtones which, as the story progresses, will be allied to Deer Woman's nocturnal visitations. Tansi acknowledges that deer women are 'wild', and they possess no 'reason', which establishes her as a force for disruption. Roanhorse's depiction of Deer Woman establishes her as a trickster figure one that moves through boundaries and is not bound by rules. Yet, the use of the words 'reason' and 'evensong' represent the narrative conflict between the dominant culture's discourse of Christian religion and its delimiting of someone or something to logical, clear judgement and carefully justified acts, and that of Native American oral tradition with its narratives of living mythical and

9. Roanhorse was one of the contributors to this anthology.

10. Deer Woman through this comic is linked to political and social movements such as Arming Sisters Reawakening Warriors and indirectly to Missing and Murdered Indigenous Woman (MMIW), whose signature red hand might stem from the red dabs used in *Deer Woman: A Vignette*. In 2019, an independent inquiry in Canada, into the murder and disappearance of indigenous woman, reached the conclusion that this is a perpetuated form of genocide. A recent television series *Reservation Dogs* has also used the figure of Deer Woman in a number of episodes.

supernatural beings. Deer Woman's supernatural nature allows her to move between human and non-human and remains outside of dominant moral laws or systems. Vizenor (1994:57) considers that a spirit being, like Deer Woman, is the shadow of oral tradition and tribal memory, and it is the shadow of Deer Woman that will meld with Tansi's identity to create the doubling of her shadow self. Deer Woman's role in tribal tradition is to 'keep the young in line' with community standards, which it will become apparent is not quite her role in the story (Russow 2013:26). Carolyn Dunn writes that this mythical spirit's role can be sinister but teaches that power must be respected (2003). The injurious aspect of Deer Woman will predominate in Roanhorse's story as she engineers monstrous, gothic acts of violence. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (1996:ix) writes that 'the monster is that uncertain cultural body in which is condensed an intriguing simultaneity or doubleness'. The figure of Deer Woman is just an uncertain cultural body, who as trickster forges the gothic doubleness present in the narrative.

Writing on the function of Deer Woman, Annette Van Dyke indicates that she is the 'spirit that bewitches those who can be enticed away from family and clan into misuse of sexual energy' (2004:169). In Tansi's case, this supernatural bewitchment is easily accomplished because she has already rejected her family and her tribal traditions, to enter and assimilate into the white dominant mythology. Tansi's affair with a married white Chef, who discards her when she 'demanded more of his time', reveals Tansi's need to see herself through the perceptions of the dominant society's culture, myths, and relationships that ignore the colonial oppression of her people (Roanhorse 2019:273). This is obvious when she thinks about 'home. A tiny reservation that I outgrew' (Roanhorse 2019:273). Tansi as a victim of Deer Woman is a character whose sexual identity is in 'conflict or negotiation' with her social identity (Russow 2013:27). She has become 'lost in the folds of opposing cultures' and her denial of her Native American kin and tribal culture allows Deer Woman to seduce her into a relationship of erotic obsession and punishment consequent on her sexual transgression and lack of responsibility to kin (Vizenor 1990:76).

In Roanhorse's story, Deer Woman uses her sexual favours to lure Tansi into doing, 'terrible things' to 'have her taste linger on your tongue' (2019:271). Here the sexual act is linked to ghastly actions or the non-defining use of the words 'terrible things', which is disturbing. Tansi's sexual desire takes on cannibalistic overtones where Deer Woman's taste lingers on her tongue. This hint at cannibalism presages the monstrousness associated with erotic need and manipulation as Deer Woman awakens Tansi to 'the pleasures of the body' and to what will become 'the fleeting joys of being frightened or frightening' (Cohen 1996:17). Tansi's infatuation and hankering for Deer Woman is unusual in Deer Woman stories; generally such sexual obsession and seduction occurs to 'lure young men away from their duties' (Van Dyke 2004:171). However, as Roanhorse's story progresses it is

Tansi who is lured away from her ambitions to become a chef and participate in the world of Western cuisine and training. Her beguilement sees her missing work and losing her internship. For Tansi, Deer Woman is 'enough. She is my work. She is my home' (Roanhorse 2019:279). The colonial myth of Tansi's mundane reality has been disturbed and going out for dinner drinks with colleagues she realises that she is a 'foreigner' and that their 'words, their jokes all spoken is a language unfamiliar', at the same time she seems to lack access to her own language (Roanhorse 2019:279). Tansi's life is on the borders, a 'life in the shadows' as she moves between the colonial quotidian world and the sexual dreamworld that slowly leads to Deer Woman becoming her only point of reference and focus (Anzaldúa 1987:9). Existing in two places at once, Tansi's ambivalence can, as Vizenor (1994:57) has argued, lead to a 'shadow identity' that is mythogothically unstable (Vizenor 1990:270). I argue that these different mythologies become the shadow selves, the myth of Deer Woman and the settler myth, that inhabit Tansi and will result in her identity splitting into what Vizenor has called 'cultural schizophrenia' (Vizenor 1990:270).

Roanhorse (2019) indicates that Tansi's encounter with Deer Woman was not a:

... chance encounter in a moonlit wood, in the way of fairytales. I did not chase her fleeing shadow through a dappled grove of ancient trees to the banks of an enchanted pool. I was not lured away, as is the way of hunters who have, on a solstice eve, somehow become the prey themselves. (p. 274)

Her meeting with Deer Woman does not partake of the tropes of Western fantasy of dappled groves, banks of enchanted pools, or on 'solstice eve' hunters lured away to become 'the prey themselves' (Roanhorse 2019:274). Roanhorse rescripts this colonial supernatural fantasy that relies on pastoral stereotypes and discourse with its 'groves', 'enchanted pools' and 'solstice eve'. Solstice eve, like the previous use of evensong, relies on Western religious beliefs.¹¹ However, solstice eve was originally a pagan celebration and has associations with human sacrifice and ritual, and in the context of the description the words 'lured' and 'prey' provides this celebration with darker gothic overtones.¹² Although Tansi's immersion in the written world of Western mythology allows her to become the helpless prey of the true hunter 'predator of predators', the living myth of cautionary tales: Deer Woman (Russow 2013:30); this female supernatural spirit has the power of agency and not the white male hero of colonial fairy tale. The narrative's mythogothic space is where the conflict between Tansi's privileging European myth as discourse will be challenged through her beguilement into a violent rediscovery of her indigenous history identity and traditions.

11. Winter Solstice (Solstice Eve) was a pagan celebration that was adopted by Christians as Christmas.

12. There is a hint at Keats's *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, with its pastoral ballad form and pools, pale knight encounter of both pleasure and pain and enthrallment as well as the Greek myth of Daphne and of Artemis and Endymion. Roanhorse is very subtly accessing and intertextuality referencing Western fairy and myth.

Julian Rice (1992:33) writes that a meeting with Deer Woman results in the person 'plunging into confusion and this is foreshadowed by the time of day which is just before nightfall'. Tansi's own plunge into confusion and obsession begins, not in the dominant narrative of a dappled grove with its pastoral overtones, but in a bar in the urban city of Manhattan where she encounters Deer Woman. In an interesting parallel, Joy Harjo's poem 'Deer Dancer' talks about a bar into which Deer Woman walks as 'the woman inside the woman' and as 'the myth slipped down through dream time', which are lines that Roanhorse (1990:5) seems to capture in her own representation of Deer Woman and Tansi. Situating her protagonist in two spaces at once, that of dominant mythology and indigenous myth, Roanhorse establishes a double space of confusing mythogothic struggle between Tansi's shadow selves, 'the woman inside the woman', the dream time she shares with Deer Woman, and her quotidian reality (Harjo 1990:5). Tansi's identity becomes situated between alienation and relatedness; reality and the supernatural, dreaming and wakefulness as she 'floats between words and dreams' and her identity becomes lost 'in the folds' of opposing cultures (Vizenor 1990:78, 76). Her mythogothic doubling begins to be more overtly developed as she is invaded by the 'remanence of shadows' (Vizenor 1993:8).

Mirrors and doubles

Caught in the hypnotic power of Deer Woman's gaze, Tansi's strange shadow doubling is held in the mirroring that occurs when (Roanhorse 2019):

her eyes meet mine, vast luminous. They say that if you gaze into someone's eyes, you can see their soul, but my lover has no soul. Her eyes are mirrors, showing me only myself, and I turn away from what I see. (p. 271)

The doe-like eyes, that stare at Tansi, are not human in their size and luminosity but act as shiny reflective surfaces that introduce a sense of the uncanny. Looking into the mirror of her lover's eyes Tansi sees only a reflection of herself, and it is as though she is and is not Deer Woman. There is a sense of transformation as if Tansi remains entrapped in the dream governed by Deer Woman and only if she turns away from looking at her reflection does she regain a sense of 'reality' and control of her colonial identity. It is this echoing that reinforces a shadow doubling, which Sigmund Freud proposes could be a person who is unsure of his or her sense of self, and therefore closely identifies with another or substitutes the other's self for their own. He further argues that this self 'may thus be duplicated, divided and interchanged' (Freud 2003:142). Deer Woman and Tansi are aspects of one another, they are shadow doubles that in this passage appear to reflect only one face. The blowing of deer magic through the mirroring gaze ensures that Tansi remains immersed in mythic time and the 'transformation space between tribal experiences and dreams' (Harjo 1990:5; Vizenor 1984:3). Tansi does not adequately understand the nature of this mythical spirit because she has 'not been

properly prepared according to tradition' against the magic of Deer Woman, and is thus unable to save herself from pain and suffering, which will be the result of the death dance in which she participates (Dunn 2003; Owens 1992:148). I would suggest that Roanhorse reveals the darker aspect of Deer Woman the trickster, who both is and is not Tansi, and who contrives horrific deeds that finally cause Tansi's descent into apparent madness. Deer Woman becomes the monster that functions as Tansi's alter ego and is a projection of what Cohen calls an Other self (1996:17). However, the Eurocentric reader is never sure if Deer Woman is a projection of Tansi's own shadow self or a supernatural being who materially exists and beguiles Tansi into perpetrating a ferocious human harvesting.

Blood, murder and cannibalism

The immersion in blood and destruction belongs to the dream world where Tansi floats and hears Deer Woman calling her: "'TANSI, TANSI', MY lover whispers my name. Is it time to *Harvest* the hearts?'" The horror of her question is always fresh, always shock' (Roanhorse 2019:271). The capitalisation of Tansi's name is like a call to awaken someone out of a bad dream, or a call for Tansi to step into the ritual ceremony of her dream. It is hypnotic in its repetition and seems to act through the means of oral incantation. The capitalised possessive pronoun 'MY' is also an oddity; however, it is an indication of Tansi's need to hold onto Deer Woman as something belonging solely to herself. Similarly, the question asked is peculiar in phraseology as it seems to be Deer Woman asking Tansi whether she thinks it is time to *Harvest* the hearts. This implies that Deer Woman is only an accomplice, rather than an instigator. The idea of Tansi and Deer Woman as entwined one within the other in this harvesting of hearts sets up an uncanny transformation and interplay of shadow selves and mirroring. This is furthered in the horror of the 'always fresh, always shock' and the seesaw movement between states is marked by the comma that separates the phrases 'always fresh, always shock' in which a sense of continual repetition is held, evoking something familiar yet always unfamiliar or disquieting. I suggest that the repeated question represents the movement between dream (night) and reality (day) and the sense of the oral refrain that is held in the story. This strange dislocation between time seems to replicate Vizenor's 'mythic time' with its transformational space that exists between tribal experiences and dreams (1984:3). Coming from within this mythic time, Deer Woman transforms and transgresses past and present, myth and reality, space, and settler linear time.

The ceremony of harvesting hearts is gory and abject. The definition of the verb *Harvest* is a 'gathering of crops', 'animals caught and killed for human use' and to 'remove organs from person or animal for experimental purposes' and Tansi's strange response is that removing human hearts is not very different from 'preparing coeur du boeuf' (Oxford Shorter Dictionary 1993:1194; Roanhorse 2019:278). This statement ensures that the bodies of the human murder victims are animalised and equated with food and are

thereby rendered abject. In the story, the *Harvest* is a mythogothic ritual sacrifice, which is affirmed when Deer Woman comments: 'did you know that the Aztecs could remove a beating heart in less than two minutes?' (Roanhorse 2019:277). The shadows of different myths collide like sliding panels, the bloody ceremony of Aztec sacrifice, the bloody ceremony of the harvesting of white women as a crop of animals, and their positioning within the dominant mythic narrative with its hidden ghosts of murdered Native Americans, particularly women. These aspects seem to combine to form Tansi's multilayered mythogothic shadow selves. These selves reside in a simultaneity of abject repulsion for the blood of the *Harvest* that in turn is overshadowed by sexual bewitchment. This allows Tansi to ignore Deer Woman's 'bloody breath' and her hand that 'smells faintly of rot' (Roanhorse 2019:271). According to Julia Kristeva (1982:3), a 'wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay does not signify death'. However, this rot that is smelt on Deer Woman is that of blood and death and establishes the overwhelming impression of transgression that this mythic spirit incarnates in the story. Yet, her bloody breath and the smell of rot associated with her hands becomes familiar to Tansi; however, at the same time there remains a repugnance, which Tansi pushes away as unfamiliar, as separate from herself, as not her. As she indicates when Deer Woman is absent in the mundane daylight world of the urban colonial city, she can tell herself that the bloody *Harvest* 'never happened' thereby denying her involvement in the killings and reinserting herself within settler norms and the hidden denial of its guilt ridden history (2019:271).

Tansi notes that 'the first time Deer Woman convinces me to kill for her, it is a hot June evening' (2019:275). Tansi goes on to describe the resultant carnage (Roanhorse 2019):

My hands up to the elbow are covered in blood. My heart is thumping wildly in my chest, but perhaps not as wildly or desperately as it should be for what I have done. Shouldn't I be vomiting? Crying? Shouldn't I feel more than a desire for her blessing... she leans forward to catch the drip of blood in her small hands, brings it to her mouth and drinks her long white skirt flaring around her, blood soaking the hem. She licks her fingers clean. (p. 278)

The blood to her elbows is an invasion of the body from the outside destroying the wholeness and purity and is grotesquely abject. The body has become permeable and has 'collapsed into the outside', which exceeds the limit of division between the body's inside and the containing boundary of its skin (Grosz 1994:193). Death becomes something that no longer respects 'borders, positions, rules' and represents 'the utmost of abjection' (Kristeva 1982:4). In the gruesome and grotesque acts that Tansi commits, there can be what Kristeva calls a 'grandeur' in amorality and even in a 'crime that flaunts its disrespect for the law' that can be liberating (Kristeva 1982:4). This liberation and disrespect for colonial law might be an aspect of Roanhorse's narrative; however, Tansi is equally guilty of transgressing Native

American culture and practices, where spiritual traditions are similarly disrespected. In the light of this disrespect for tradition, the crimes Tansi commits can be considered 'immoral, sinister, scheming' as a 'terror that disassembles' and where passion uses the 'body for barter' (Kristeva 1982:4). Throughout the interaction between Tansi and her mythical shadow self, resides an immoral, monstrous manipulation in which there is a misuse of sexual energy as a barter system for the harvesting of hearts (Van Dyke 2004:169). In the context of her involvement in the *Harvest*, it becomes apparent that Tansi's feelings are not normal, no abject vomiting, no crying, no guilt. She seems to have passed 'beyond and outside of the condition of being human' (Burnham 2014:231). I would argue that Deer Woman's, and by extension Tansi's, association with blood and death situates her as a 'hungry ghost' or a 'hungry spirit being' that is often associated with the mythical being of the Wendigo, an indigenous mythogothic spirit being (Burnham 2014:231).¹³ In some visual depictions, this mythic monster has horns like a stag, and its breath is considered to smell rotten. The depiction of antlers on the Wendiigo could, I argue, act as a link between the Deer Woman of the story and this mythical being with its cannibalistic hunger.¹⁴

Annette van Dyke (2004:184) notes that sexual obsession can also be identified with the Wendiigo's cannibalistic hunger, and she goes on to indicate that the Wendiigo 'acts as both a specter of starvation and a warning to those who are excessively greedy. Gluttons may be eaten by windigos or become windigos themselves'. Jack Forbes (2008:24) has equated the wendiigo's hunger with madness and evil, and the committing of 'terrible evil acts, including cannibalism'. Cannibalism for Forbes is something voracious that 'exploits the life of another (often to the point of killing the other) for its own benefit' (Howard 2021:36). I would postulate that Deer Woman's blood drinking, bloody breath and the scent of rot that pervades her body parallels the characteristics associated with the Wendiigo. This connection is decisively present when Deer Woman drinks the blood from the slaughtered bodies and carefully and sensuously licks her fingers clean. The cannibalistic Wendiigo hunger of Deer Woman is blatantly revealed when she says: 'leave the body here in the forest ... You'd be surprised what a deer will eat' (Roanhorse 2019:278). Murder, blood, cannibalism, sexual obsession and grim vengeance all represent the misuse of Deer Woman's power as she indulges in her monstrous side and the gothic nature of what occurs seems to revel in the representation of 'horrific violence' (Sivils 2014:85). Deer Woman and Tansi seem transformed into mythogothic monsters; yet they can, I suggest, be seen as a reflection of the horrors associated with both the colonial past and present, and the murderous destruction of the Native American people.

13.This word has a number of different spellings. I am using the spelling Wendiigo.

14.The image of Deer Woman on the cover of *Deer Woman: An Anthology* provides her with stag-like horns as do many of the drawings that seem to provide her a further male/female human/animal hybridity.

Spectres of history

Tansi only murders Eurocentric women, and she mentions that 13 have gone missing, harvested by her knives.¹⁵ The number 13 plays into Western mythical superstition of it as being bad luck and impending doom. However, this number was sacred to the Aztecs and their ritual calendar and Deer Woman's comments that 'the Aztecs could remove a beating heart in less than two minutes?' reveals the connection to ritual slaughter in the killings that Tansi commits (Roanhorse 2019:277). Tansi goes on to list the dead as a blonde-haired clerk and the grey-eyed mother of two who is 'the backbone of her family' but when she asks Deer Woman: 'Are you sure this is justice?', the response to this question is 'they were monsters ... it does no good to have mercy on a monster. They will not have mercy on you' (Roanhorse 2019:272, 278). Roanhorse has employed the figure of Deer Woman to challenge and invert the narrative of Frontier Gothic mythology in which Native American Indians are depicted as 'taking pleasure in horrendous acts of violence' (Sivils 2014:86). There is a resultant mythogothic clash between the 'horrors of the American colonial project' and the return of the repressed oral mythic spirit of Deer Woman who is exacting revenge for the 'centuries of injustices against Native Americans' (Sivils 2014:85). Nevertheless, killing women, even for a Deer Woman, is an act of sacrilege and Jack Forbes (2008:22) indicates that 'consuming another's life for one's own private purpose is a "form of insanity that implies disrespect of the sacred interconnection of all forms of life"'. Redding's indication that native American myth and the gothic are intertwined provides support for my conceptualisation of the mythogothic as a tool to conduct a critical reading of Roanhorse's story.¹⁵

Although the women who are killed are described as monsters because they are part of the dominant myth and have benefited from the massacres their settler forebearers committed against Native Americans, for the Eurocentric reader, what Tansi is persuaded to do, remains equally monstrous. I would suggest that the serial murders Tansi commits are an allegory Roanhorse employs for the 'gender violence under settler colonialism' perpetrated against Native American women both in the past and in the present (Anderson 2020:320). The grisly and shockingly vicious deaths of the white women convey a 'sense of remorselessness', and this hyperbolic violence seems to be an attempt by Roanhorse to repurpose and decolonise the perceptions of the reader (Hansen 2021:111). Using allegory and subversion, her story wages a battle against dominant mythology. However, the effectiveness of subverting the presiding myth represents a conundrum because the vengefulness of the human sacrifices cannot alter the past and whether it can alter the present becomes moot in the narrative. Nevertheless, the horror of such excessive imagery forces the reader into a recognition of an alternate

15.This horrific violence and the supernatural figure of Deer Woman who is the driving force behind these murderous events, can be considered as Roanhorse's satiric counter to the thematic found in Frontier Gothic of the demonic, murderous Indian who kills white women.

chronicle as it frees the spectres of the Native American historic past into the present of the story.

It is these spectres that are present in Deer Woman's request to Tansi to 'Tell me about your people', to which Tansi replies 'We don't talk, they wouldn't approve. If they knew about us---' (Roanhorse 2019:276). What Tansi has missed in Deer Woman's question is the word 'people'. She is not referring solely to Tansi's direct family members but to the tribes and customs to which Tansi should belong. Deer Woman's question is about kinship and about social ties, and it is the loss of these ties that she laments when she says 'My family is gone... They were murdered. A long time ago. But sometimes it feels like only yesterday' (Roanhorse 2019:276) which puzzles Tansi into the stuttered colonial platitude 'I-I'm sorry', which indicates that she has no understanding of her tribal historic past (Roanhorse 2019:276). It is the hidden evils of the past that are recorded in the list Deer Woman says she has been keeping '...Of my family that were murdered'; a list she hands to Tansi who sees the names 'Wessagusset. Pamuncky. Massapequa. Pound Ridge. Susquehannock. Great Swamp. Occoneechee ... Skull Valley. Sand Creek. Wounded Knee' (Roanhorse 2019:297). Each of the place names is separated by a full stop that enforces the idea of an ending and brings the history that occurred in these places into stark focus.¹⁶ The names refer to colonial massacres of Native Americans, in which women and children were viciously killed, most particularly at Sand Creek. Deer Woman's mythic existence forms a part of the iniquity of these events and losses because with the loss of oral tradition, represented by the people killed, a part of her is lost, too. Kyle Whyte (Citizen Potawatomi Nation) has referred to this movement between ancestors and the present as 'spiraling temporality' where the past, the present and the future are always together in narratives of 'cyclicity, reversal, dream-like scenarios' (2018b:6). It is this unfolding of a continuous dialogue with the past (ancestors) that will transform a descendant into an ancestor (2018b:6). It is this indigenous conception of temporality in which the present and the future cannot be distinguished from the past that is epitomised by Deer Woman and her family, but which has been rejected by Tansi. However, where Deer Woman's family belongs to a temporality that spirals and is mythic, the place names she has written down have become a part of the conquering and heroic settler mythology. Yet, this mythology filled with victories over the demonic Native American is a past frozen in the linearity of history books, monuments, and settler gothic, but not experienced in the spiral of mythic time where the past remains alive in the present and the future. In forcing Tansi to recognise the calamity of her people's history, Deer Woman brings the hidden ghosts of the

16. Wessagusset was a massacre that occurred in 1622 in Plymouth Massachusetts. Pamuncky was a massacre that occurred in 1622 in Virginia. Massapequa massacre of 1644 occurred in New York. Pound Ridge massacre of 1644 occurred in New York. Susquehannock massacre of 1675 occurred in Virginia. Great Swamp massacre of 1675 occurred at Rhode Island. Occoneechee Island massacre of 1676 occurred in Virginia. Skull Valley massacre of 1864 occurred in Arizona. Sand Creek massacre of 1864 occurred in Colorado. Wounded Knee massacre of 1890 occurred South Dakota. All of the names refer to Native American massacres, the one best known for a Western audience would be Sand Creek with its massacre of women and children and the chopping up of their bodies in a horrendous mutilation.

genocide of her peoples and the loss of their culture and oral tradition into the present and lays this history bare. The murder and mutilation of the white women by Tansi can be seen as a payback, not only for the genocide of the past with its massacre, rape, and mutilation of indigenous women, but for those in present time. Rebecca Roanhorse in an interview indicates that the murders Deer Woman incites represent her attempt to 'get pre-invasion, pre-conquest, and this is the best way that someone like a Deer Woman thinks that she can do that' (Roanhorse cite in Schoonover 2022:300).

What is interesting is that Roanhorse displays Deer Woman as having written these names down on paper, using Western signs, which act as traces of the atrocities that the colonialists enacted in these places.¹⁷ Using the written word sets up the opposition between colonial discourse and that of oral tradition, between colonial expression of myth and that of tribal expression of shadow memories. For Vizenor, the shadows are animate entities and an unsaid presence in names, the memories held in silence, and the imagination of tribal experiences (1994:72). Deer Woman is a shadow that survives only in tribal memory, and now she is Tansi's shadow self, a ghost of the past in the present, a trace seeking vengeance for the loss of her people. As Tansi notes 'The roar in my head is grief, wide and vast enough to drown whole new worlds. I know it is not mine, but hers' (Roanhorse 2019:279). The historical past becomes a shadow that invades and surrounds Tansi, and although she appears not to experience this grief, she is trapped in the shadows of its memory. In Roanhorse's story grief is held in an 'unappeasable loss, cultural dislocation and the persistence of the past' that calls out to be avenged (Redding 2016:63). Tansi, in turn, has replicated similar violence in an inverted allegorical commentary on the hegemonic myths both past and present. Derrida (1994:46, 181). writes that hegemony still 'organizes the repression' and the 'confirmation of a haunting' and that such haunting belongs to 'every hegemonic structure'. Perhaps the mythogothic shadow memories of the past evoked in the story remain repressed by the present colonial mythology so as to evade and deny its atrocious secret, one that threatens to return and upend the power of its dominant discourse. Roanhorse wishes to force a recognition of the Native American past and present, and she does this through her deployment of grotesque and visceral mythogothic images that rescript the dominant narratives and myths.

Mythogothic revenge

The climax of the story is the staging in Central Park of the harvested hearts. This is done on one of the main celebratory holidays in the United States, Independence Day (4th July), where a band is playing the Star-Spangled Banner and there are screaming kids with 'Rainbow Rocket pops', picnics, and 'shouting masses waiting for sunset and the promised

17. There is a long history of writing on Birch bark. Perhaps this list of Deer Woman might refer to such writing as it would link into the writing down of oral tradition and historical events. Louise Erdrich writes that 'Ojibwe people were great writers from way back and synthesized the oral and written tradition by keeping mnemonic scrolls of inscribed birchbark. The first paper, the first books' (2014:12). See Joshua J. Anderson (2020), Blessing (1963) and Berliner (2010).

fireworks' (Roanhorse 2019:280). It is into these festivities that Deer Woman and Tansi bring the hearts. In ritualistic manner, Tansi places the hearts in a circle in the middle of which Deer Woman lies down. Tansi indicates that what she is doing appears to be an 'ancient conjuration' but that she is working with 'blood and muscle and grief on the most American of holidays' (Roanhorse 2019:280). This holiday speaks to what Richard Slotkin terms the 'metaphor of the American experience' which marks the mythological foundations of the dominant culture and the 'grief' of genocide for the Native Americans (1973:5). Lying in the middle of a circle made up of hearts from mutilated bodies, Deer Woman becomes a horrifying figure of cannibalism and an image of 'monstrous spectacle' that plays into the Indian Captivity novel, but critiques it, as Roanhorse reveals the interconnected 'borderlands and failed repression, of a haunted national psyche' which in the narrative of the story can be seen to challenge the 'centuries of injustices against Native Americans' (Sivils 2014:85). Tansi asks Deer Woman whether her family is back, to which Deer Woman replies: 'They cannot come back, but their children are still here' to which Tansi asks, 'Then we're home?' only to open her eyes to find that she is alone (Roanhorse 2019:281). Deer Woman has vanished into the 'uncanny space' of 'the forest' that lines 'the parkway' (Vlaicu 2021:6). This forest or wild space has been, as Cornelia Vlaicu argues, 'constructed in opposition to civilization's space' (2021:6). Deer Woman has escaped from colonial reality back into the shadows of mythic space and therefore cannot be contained as a criminal (Vlaicu 2021:6). Instead, Roanhorse allows Deer Woman to punish a Native American woman, Tansi, that acts as a twist in her rewrite of the Deer Woman story, where Tansi faces the consequences of not respecting her tribal family, but more so for her forsaking of her traditions and familial obligations in favour of the colonial settler myths and culture. Although Roanhorse's aim might be to show that the ritual ceremony in the park is one aimed at restoring balance, it remains an abuse of what Vine J. Deloria (Standing Rock Sioux) refers to as 'creatureness' (2003:89). At the same time, Tansi as a Deer Woman challenges the sanctity of the festivities through an engagement with a site and myth central to colonial aggression (Weaver 1997:xiii).

Conclusion

Tansi's story ends as it started with a refrain (Roanhorse 2019):

Love a [D]eer [W]oman. Deer [W]omen are wild and without reason. A Deer Woman will make you do terrible things for a chance to raise up nations, to lie down with a dream. You will weep before it is over ... the cries of one who has found lost relatives. And if they ever let you out of your cell, tell them you will do it again. (p. 281)

Altered from the opening refrain, the words now encourage the loving of a Deer Woman because she is not a restricted force but one of chaos, destruction, and creation, representing a touchstone for the continuity of traditional values. The terrible things that she requires of those who love her

become a resurgence and lead to the shattering of dominant mythologies. Hers is a call to action to fight for the truth and the rights of tribal nations, of home and kin and shadow memories. However, Tansi no longer seems to be sane, and the reader can almost hear her as she screams the words 'if they ever let you out of your cell, tell them that you will do it all again' (Roanhorse 2019: 281). The ambivalence is that the reader is not sure if Tansi is in a prison cell or the cell of an asylum, either way she is incarcerated and remains under hegemonic captivity and surveillance. Although she reveals a militant voice, the gaze of the colonial institution will, ultimately, render her invisible and, unless she escapes, will vanish her.

Gerald Vizenor (1994:168) indicates that the creation of the Native other was established by the dominant authority as a 'double other of surveillance' and the 'double other of the antiselves of dominance'. Throughout my article, I have shown how the mythogothic representation of Tansi is one of doubleness, of shadow selves, where she remains an anti-self to the shadows of her tribal stories, identities, and history as well as an anti-self to the mythology of the colonisers. My argument has considered how the concept of the mythogothic can critically approach a reading of a work such as Roanhorse's to invert and contest gothic tropes and mythologies. In this instance, Roanhorse challenges the dominant Frontier Gothic mythology through her drawing upon the mythical figure of the trickster Deer Woman, who acts as an indigenous gothic counternarrative and a site of both 'resistance and survivance' (Vizenor 1992:188). Deer Woman in Roanhorse's story is 'the deer who portrayed the relatives of strangers... ancestors who never left', where the way back remains 'deer breath on icy windows': survivance, shadow remembrance, dreams, and transformation (Harjo 1990:6-7).

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