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Suzette Mayr

Volume 43, Number 1, 2018

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1058062ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1058062ar>

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Publisher(s)

University of New Brunswick, Dept. of English

ISSN

0380-6995 (print)

1718-7850 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Mayr, S. (2018). The Fall of the House of Buck: The “Haunted” House as Revelatory Space in Daniel David Moses’s Big Buck City. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 43(1).
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1058062ar>

The Fall of the House of Buck: The “Haunted” House as Revelatory Space in Daniel David Moses’s *Big Buck City*

SUZETTE MAYR

IN HIS BOOK *PURSUED BY A BEAR: Talks, Monologues, and Tales*, Daniel David Moses describes his experience with the premiere production of his first play *Coyote City*, and his irritation with the play’s director, who refused to believe in the reality of the character Johnny, a ghost. Moses recalls his conversation with the director:

Johnny’s a real ghost, I insisted [to her], feeling, despite my intuition, oxymoronic even as I said it. Okay, my director replied deliberately. I admit that she came with me as far as she could, though I did have to put up with ironic renditions of the theme music from *The Twilight Zone* the first few times we came to work on any scene with the ghost. (7-8)

Moses reflects later that he wishes he had “been confident enough to mutter to her something like: ‘I bet you never get to direct *Hamlet*’” (55).

Moses’s insistence on the character Johnny as being real and Johnny’s deadness being “ordinary” (7) are part of what Moses sees as a key element of *Coyote City*, what he identifies as “the conflict between the material and the spiritual, and Johnny, as a ghost, focussed that conflict” (7). While, relatively speaking, much study has been done of the Governor General’s Award-nominated *Coyote City*, the first in Moses’s “city plays” tetralogy, the play’s immediate sequel, *Big Buck City*, has been eclipsed by *Coyote City* in terms of attention from literary scholars, and reviews of the first 1991 production in *The Globe and Mail* and *The Toronto Star* are at best guarded, at worst tepid.¹ But twenty-five years later, *Big Buck City* is worth reconsidering because of its continuation of Moses’s study of “the conflict between the material and the spiritual,” and how the play reconceives the haunted house

trope and its use as a metaphor to describe so-called “haunting” in settler cultures. Instead of a ghost as the locus for the conflict, as in *Coyote City*, in *Big Buck City* a house embodies the focus of the conflict. The house also operates as a counter-narrative to the ubiquitous “Indian burial ground” cliché in popular culture as the rationale for a piece of land or building being uncanny or haunted, what Colleen E. Boyd and Coll Thrush note in their introduction to the book *Phantom Past, Indigenous Presence*, has become “a tried-and-true element of the cultural industry” (vii). Boyd and Thrush argue that possessed, sacred Indigenous territory or the “Indian uncanny” (ix) remains one of the most common explanations for the supernatural attributes of a house or other physical site in texts produced in settler colonies such as Canada and the United States (viii).

Daniel David Moses in *Big Buck City* writes against the “Indian uncanny” cliché, and instead unravels what constitutes horror and the “uncanny” in the context of the haunted house genre by making the house in the play real and ordinary, while simultaneously reworking the notion of what “haunted” can mean. Just as he broadens the parameters in *Coyote City* of how ordinary a ghost can be, Moses expands the limits of how ordinary a supernatural house can be in *Big Buck City*. The house in *Big Buck City* is “uncanny,” but not because it is haunted — rather, the house hovers on the border between the animate and inanimate: it is a living entity. I would further suggest that Moses questions the limits of what constitutes “horror” when he gestures toward the “natural horror” (Carroll 12) of historical, genocidal abuses perpetrated on Indigenous people and the after-effects of this violence. In doing so, *Big Buck City* allows a re-evaluation of the metaphor of the haunted house and its relationship to so-called “haunting” in settler cultures.

For many postcolonial scholars, the haunted house as a metaphor is attractive when discussing postcolonial nations such as Canada. Expanding on ideas put forward by theorists such as Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture*, scholars have often used the haunted house as a metaphor to represent “uncanny” nations (Gelder and Jacobs 22) such as Canada and Australia, where the “spectral figures of . . . colonialism return to haunt the present and solicit our recognition” (O’Riley 7). For example, Australian critic David Crouch, in “National Hauntings: The Architecture of Australian Ghost Stories,” contends that “haunted houses provide a precise figure for an unsettled country” (94), while

Canadian postcolonial theorist and poet Rita Wong begins an article titled "Troubling Domestic Limits" with the sentence, "I live at the west entrance of a haunted house called Canada" (109). However, the inherent problem in many scholars' equation of the haunted house with an "unsettled" nation such as Canada is that the metaphor inadvertently contributes yet another example of what Emilie Cameron points out is "a long-standing practice of relegating Aboriginality to the immaterial and spectral past" ("Reconciliation" 151). In the case of Wong, not only does Indigenous post-contact history haunt "us," but the horrors of the Canadian Japanese internment haunt "us" too.

Furthermore, the haunted-house-as-nation metaphor also implies that pre-Contact Canada was completely "unsettled" — it erases the fact that Indigenous nations and settlements occurred, albeit not of the colonial kind. In essence, the postcolonial haunted house metaphor often overlooks the multiple meanings of "settled" and "unsettled," "home" and Homi Bhabha's paraphrasing of Freud when Bhabha refers to the condition of being "unhomed" ("World" 141), in terms of different constituencies. Indigenous peoples living in what is now known as Canada are and were *also* "unsettled" or "unhomed" by European colonial invasion and its legacies. While Indigenous dispossession often serves as a source of the uncanny for non-Indigenous inhabitants in Canada — "they" (Indigenous people) haunt "us" (non-Indigenous people) in tropes such as the "Indian burial ground" — this article will investigate how *Big Buck City* pushes the limits of the haunted house trope, and presents the possibility of "re-indigeniz[ing]" (Cariou 733) a suburban Canadian space.

To sum up: while the *haunted* house can stand in as an easy metaphor for numerous concerns such as the "haunted" nation, the monstrous, *animate* house as presented by Moses — a house that is itself a live organism rather than simply an inanimate setting for ghosts (like most fictional haunted houses) — on the other hand, disputes the metaphorical value of "hauntedness." Much like the Indigenous authors Cynthia Sugars discusses in *Canadian Gothic*, by rewriting the conventional haunted house and in effect "indigenizing" it, in *Big Buck City* Moses "court[s] a Gothic model while simultaneously challenging it. . . . This approach functions not solely to rewrite the colonizer's narratives, but to reassert Indigenous narratives" (Sugars 218). Haunted

houses can be exorcised; animate houses — such as the one in *Big Buck City* — cannot.²

I am prodded into considering Moses's reconceptualizing of the haunted house horror genre by Warren Cariou, who suggests that some Indigenous writers have a different way of approaching "spirits" in their writing:

for Native readers and writers, there is no reason that . . . Indigenous ghosts or spirits should be frightening. Native people already have plenty of evidence in their daily lives of how the legacies of colonialism have been passed down through the generations; they do not need to summon spectres to fulfil that function. But Native writers do represent spirits in their work nonetheless; it is just that these spirits are not necessarily figures of uncanny terror. They may be malevolent beings . . . but they may also be figures of healing, ceremony, or political action. Or they may simply be ancestors. And while many such spirits do seem to address the transgressions of the colonial past, they usually do so as part of a call for some kind of redress or change in the present. (730)

In *Big Buck City*, the animate house with its terrible plumbing operates less as a figure of terror for its married owners Jack and Barbara Buck, but instead has "revelatory functions" that Rebecca Janicker argues is typical in many haunted house fictions (12). The animate house in *Big Buck City* is more "a call for some kind of redress or change in the present" (730), as Cariou suggests. By literally shitting itself as a "shit house" (Moses, *Big Buck* 92) with its faulty, shrieking plumbing, and by shining a light — what is referred to in the stage directions as a "green, searching spirit light" of unknown origin (11) — on the Bucks' secrets, the house forces the Bucks to contemplate what Cariou labels "a call for . . . change in the present" (730).

Big Buck City features a house whose bowels have come to life, coincidentally on Christmas Eve. Spurts of supernaturally bad plumbing and sewer smells (87) regularly erupt throughout the play, and the play ends with Jack Buck opening the basement door to a green, glowing shit pool. The word "shit" and its variations ("shitty," "bullshit," and "poop") appear seventy-three times in the total 110 pages of the play. Shit even interrupts in terms of sound: near the beginning of Act Two, the "sound of the toilet flushing mak[es] an ugly noise in the pipes down into the basement" (71); the stage directions tell the reader that the toilet flushes

and “the pipes protest . . . all the way to the basement” (82); and twice by the end of Act Two the “toilet flushes and the pipes scream” (100) whenever Barbara’s depressed sister Martha flushes the toilet.

But the house’s bad plumbing and the ubiquity of shit in the play do not only have to do with toilets. The plumbing’s disintegration also reflects the disintegrating “plumbing” in several characters’ physical bodies, in Jack and Barbara’s marriage, in their relationship with Barbara’s sister Martha and nieces Lena and Boo, and the unexpected, unwelcome Christmas Eve visitors in the form of “street kid” Ricky Raccoon (9) and lay preacher Clarisse Chrisjohn. This connection between the house belonging to the Bucks and the Buck family is perhaps best summed up by Marlene Goldman in *DisPossession: Haunting in Canadian Fiction*, when she points out that in Gothic literature, “the concept of the house . . . refers both to a building and a family line” (29). Essentially, just as the physical collapse of the Usher mansion in Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” mirrors the demise of the family that lives within it, so does the structurally imploding “shit house” in *Big Buck City* mirror Jack and Barbara’s problems in dealing with their emotional, familial, moral, and historical “shit.”

Notwithstanding many critics’ misgivings about applying Western psychoanalytic theory to a piece of Indigenous literature — Jodey Castricano outlines the risk of “psychological colonialism” (808) in her article “Learning to Talk with Ghosts” — the persistent presence of shit in the play makes unavoidable at least *some* reference to Julia Kristeva’s defining of abjection in *The Powers of Horror*. Later in this article I will discuss how Kristeva’s theory of the abject works in *Big Buck City*, particularly the way that the literal and figurative appearances of shit contribute to the breakdown of the distinct, concrete, and symbolic “border[s]” (Kristeva 3) that the Bucks have erected around themselves in order to prop up a troublesome illusion about themselves as more worldly and successful compared to what Jack calls Barbara’s “bush Indian” (17) relatives. Significantly, Tracey Lindberg also discusses *Big Buck City* as a play about border crossings in her essay “Spirited Border Crossings: Daniel David Moses as Translator in *Coyote City*, *City of Shadows*, and *Big Buck City*,” further underlining the porousness and precariousness of the Bucks’ materialistic agenda. Their “perfectly renovated” (*Big Buck* 9) house as setting is essential in propping up this illusion that belies what happens behind their closed doors, and their

rejection of what Lindberg labels the “spiritual information” (“Spirited” 211) presented to them by Ricky Raccoon, and — I would suggest — by the supernatural house. As Homi Bhabha suggests in *The Location of Culture*, it is in the “banalities that the unhomely stirs, as the violence of a racialized society falls most enduringly on the details of life: where you can sit, or not; how you can live, or not; what you can learn, or not; who you can love, or not” (15). In the case of the Bucks, the unhomely “stirs” within the “banality” of their house’s faulty pipes but also in the Bucks’ desire not to bring down their neighbourhood’s property values, and to be like their white neighbours, aptly named “Jones” (65). The Bucks’ relationship with their house also contributes to continuing debates about what “home” potentially means for Indigenous people “unhomed” (Bhabha, “World” 141) by non-Indigenous invasion and settlement.

The house enacts what space theorist Christine Wilson would regard as the disruptive, “unrul[y]” (201) tendencies of fictional “animated” or “sentient” houses (200) in conventional haunted house, horror fiction; at the same time the Bucks’ house also reflects what Marlene Goldman in *DisPossession* argues regarding the trope of “spirit possession” (20) in contemporary Canadian literature. She argues that “instances of spirit possession . . . are often best understood as attempts at re-possessing the personal and cultural identities of marginalized groups whose knowledges have been elided and, at times, forcibly repressed by the white, patriarchal, Christian Canadian nation-state” (20-21). While the Bucks’ uncanny house is not a literal “haunted” house — the house does not contain a ghost — nevertheless, at the beginning of the play the house *has* been “enter[ed]” by a “green, searching spirit light” (11). The light descends into the house’s basement, “slams” the door, possesses and sabotages the house’s plumbing and sewage line, and seems to instigate a chaos that ultimately reveals truths to the Bucks that they have actively avoided regarding their marriage, themselves as Indigenous people, and their place in their white, racially supercilious, “nice” neighbourhood (*Big Buck* 32). In its role as a possessed, animated house, the house in *Big Buck City* ultimately participates in exposing the absolute in terms of the domestic “hidden” — its homeowners’ *excrement*, both literal and figurative — and exposes everything that is wrong with the “House of Buck.”

One of the play’s epigraphs quotes an observation made in Milan

Kundera's novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* that shit has "onerous theological" importance, and that the "responsibility for shit . . . rests entirely with [God], the Creator of man" (qtd. in Moses 5). Accordingly, *Big Buck City* is bookended with characters exclaiming "Holy shit" (11, 109), and Christian elements of the play such as Clarisse the lay preacher/self-proclaimed messenger angel and the manger under the Christmas tree, are repeatedly undermined or mocked by Ricky Raccoon and the house's rupturing pipes. At the beginning of the play, the green spirit light enters the basement, and later Ricky Raccoon breaks into the house through the basement window: this leads one to guess that perhaps Ricky and the light in the basement — which takes over the house's pipes and later erupts — both work toward the same end in that they are almost allies in the ways they contribute to the ruin of the Bucks' Christmas. As I will investigate later in this article, if the character Ricky Raccoon and the spirit light can be interpreted as "trickster"³ figures and the house has been possessed by the "trickster," then the play makes a very specific statement about the relationship between the Christian-based "Christmas spirit," and what Moses's contemporary, playwright Tomson Highway, might refer to as the trickster's focus on the body's excesses, given that, according to Highway, the "Trickster's most frequent conversational partner was his anus" (Highway, qtd. in Wigston 8). I shall argue later on that the house's diarrhetic animacy and imminent "sewer-cide" (*Big Buck* 87) are the effect of the enigmatic, green spirit light that has entered the house and brought it to life, and is directly linked to the character Ricky Raccoon, on whom Barbara Buck eventually blames her household and marital troubles before she completely caves in psychologically: "That kid," she says, "That kid in our Santa suit. He did it. He did it all" (104). Shit is a fact of life in a home — but it is manipulated into a non-Christian, *divine* force in this play. It animates the house, and aims to reconnect the Bucks with those elements of their private lives that they have tried to repress.

Jack Buck is a real-estate agent who specializes in selling houses that have bad "pipes" — his habit of selling houses with bad plumbing is made clear while he is on the phone with a colleague and discussing his sales strategy: "Okay-dokey. Oh now we're talking green stuff. . . . And none of them yuppies are going to look into the plumbing. We fumigate it and all we got to do is go in for the kill" (20-21). Is the Bucks' current house one of Jack's "bad" houses? Perhaps, perhaps not, but let us

consider then the family's shit and plumbing on a metaphorical level. Jack bluntly refers to Barbara's infertility as her "plumbing's screwed up" (30); and one could argue somewhat crassly that Lena's "plumbing" is also "screwed up" because she was able to get pregnant by a ghost, and because she bleeds to death immediately after giving birth. And the Bucks' marriage is already rife with unsound "plumbing" — even without the intrusion of unwelcome family members, Christmas Eve guests, and a house with plumbing problems. Barbara desperately wants a baby, but has received confirmation from her doctor saying she cannot conceive; her disappointment signals a central unhappiness in her life because not having a baby keeps her from being able to "show the whole neighbourhood we can raise a family too" (89). She also remarks to Jack "how happy we used to be" (90), never pinpointing what capped the happiness, but her outburst in the latter half of the play telling Jack that he's "so in control, it hurts" (103) suggests an angry inequality in their relationship.

Meanwhile, her craving for a "white Christmas" seems to be less a craving for snow than a craving for a more elusive and make-believe happiness. She marvels at the "glow" (23) of a gold necklace Jack gives her as an early Christmas present at the beginning of the play, saying, "This is the Christmas spirit, Jack, this glow" (23); even when Clarisse approaches her with "glad tidings," Barbara's decidedly un-Christian response is, "For Christ sake, it's Christmas! Can't you people give us a break. Leave us alone. Peace on earth!" (13). What Barbara ultimately longs for is an unattainable and consumerist-based, white nuclear family, "keeping up with the Joneses"-type illusion. Realistically, Barbara's idea of a perfect "white Christmas" seems more in line with the "green" (20) Christmas Jack wishes they could have. Furthermore, Barbara and Jack's (especially Jack's) continuous racial slurs — Jack's nickname for Barbara is "Pocahontas" (14); he refers to himself as "Big Chief of the Tipis in the Big Smoke" (40); and when Jack asks Barbara if they have reservations at a restaurant, she promptly answers, "Like all good Indians" (20) — and Barbara's longing to fit in with the Joneses (65) next door, suggest that *both* Jack and Barbara also would prefer a "white" — as in Caucasian, Anglo-Saxon — Christmas.

Barbara loves money as much as Jack does, and this also contributes to some of the bad "plumbing" in the marriage. For Jack and

Barbara Buck, being able to afford “stuff” is synonymous with love, with “be[ing] somebody”:

BARBARA: To have stuff. Not to go without. To be really loved.

JACK: To be somebody. To be able to have what you want. (90)

While Jack is more obvious in his infatuation with the “green stuff” (20), Barbara is significantly invested in what the money can give them: the perfect home and acceptance in a “nice” neighbourhood (32). But their love of money and “stuff” compromises their love of family. When her expectant niece Lena starts early contractions and bleeding, Barbara’s first reaction is to worry about the mess the birth will make: “What? Oh not on my rug!” (68), she frets. Later, however, when Barbara decides she is going to take Lena’s baby and raise it herself, she tells Jack “I’ll be smiling dollars” (89) if he helps her steal the baby, her justification being “We’ll show the whole neighbourhood we can raise a family too” (89), and that she and Jack are the best parents for the baby because they can afford to give the baby nice things.

Of course, it is not difficult to parallel the Bucks’ questionable justifications for why they would be better parents than Lena with the rationale the Canadian federal government historically used when taking Indigenous children away from their parents — because the government believed that “this was the right thing to do” (Government of Canada). Barbara’s sister Martha points out the similarity between Barbara and the Canadian government when Barbara reports back to Jack that “She called me a pale face. She said I wasn’t going to steal any babies” (97).

Both Jack and Barbara are so concerned with how they appear to the neighbours, and are so invested in “be[ing] somebody” (90), that they are ultimately willing to put themselves ahead of the welfare and well-being of their family. Their dysfunction and the house’s “screaming” pipes; its green glowing, “reek[ing] basement”; and finally the emotional disintegration within the family signal “the conflict between the material and the spiritual” highlighted by Moses in *Pursued by a Bear*.

Interestingly, Barbara is not the only character in *Big Buck City* who longs for a neat and tidy Christmas. The lay preacher Clarisse Chrisjohn also has a particular Christmas “story” in mind when she arrives as a kind of messenger angel, escorting Barbara’s pregnant niece Lena at the play’s beginning: the “story” of the birth of Jesus Christ. Lena’s giv-

ing birth to a girl rather than a boy towards the end of the play throws Clarisse completely off course: “it’s supposed to be a boy” (91), she says, “This shit house. It’s not supposed to go this way” (92). Just before she exits the house (and the play) for good, she remarks, “I don’t know how the story’s supposed to go” (107). Clarisse’s dismay with the “story” going the wrong way illuminates the “plumbing” problems of Christmas as a Christian holiday, and the “plumbing” problems of Christianity, full stop. Christianity’s patriarchal insistence on the privileging of boys and men over girls and women in the story of the birth of Jesus, to take only one example — the pregnant Virgin Mary as merely a “vessel” of the Lord in the New Testament; pregnant Lena as a “Handmaid of the Lord” (51) in *Big Buck City* — also illustrates that as far as women’s rights go, Christmas as a religious celebration has many “plumbing” problems.

In her description of abjection and “polluting objects” such as excrement, food, and the corpse, Kristeva observes that it is “not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (4). Significantly, and on a related note, Tracey Lindberg asserts that there are “multiple border crossings” (“Spirited” 211) in *Big Buck City*, not across spatial dimensions but between the living and the dead. Lindberg cites as examples the ghost Johnny; Ricky Raccoon, “an entity living on the border . . . possessing human form and spiritual information”; and Lena, “who consorts with Johnny’s ghost” (211) and who dies at the end of the play, as border crossers who are able, in their different ways, to “exist with the corporeal, around it, or beyond it” (211).

As decidedly living characters, Jack and Barbara Buck in *Big Buck City* wrestle not only with the “borders” that separate them from the dead such as Johnny’s ghost and the “spiritual information” (Lindberg, “Spirited” 211) as presented by Ricky, but with the “waste” (Kristeva 3) and “spiritual information” the house confronts them with. The unreliable metal pipes as a type of border between the Bucks and their excrement in their otherwise “perfectly renovated” (9) house disturbs them; as do the house’s unreliable doors and windows, which allow in intruders such as the spirit light and the border “entity” Ricky Raccoon (Lindberg, “Spirited” 211), and the intrusion of Lena’s messy and unwieldy body. The obstacles of Barbara’s infertile body and Jack’s excessive drinking also do “not respect borders, positions, rules” (Kristeva 4) in terms of

how the Bucks see themselves as superior to Barbara's relatives. Ricky Raccoon, in his thievery, unsolicited truth-telling, and baby-stealing, certainly does "not respect . . . rules." The faulty "plumbing" — in every sense of the word "plumbing" — "disturbs identity, system, order," and it is the "in-between, the ambiguous" (Kristeva 4) that Barbara and Jack find unbearable and untenable, such as their fragile social status as Indigenous people in the inhospitable white neighbourhood where they want to blend in. For example, when Jack insists they call the police to apprehend Ricky for breaking and entering, Barbara feels obliged to tell Jack how she worries they will appear to the neighbours if a police car parks in front of their house, and how it will affect "property values" (72). She says, "Jack, I just want to make friends. They like the house now." Jack responds, "You see [the neighbours'] eyes glaze over every day. . . . Babsy, we shouldn't care about those buggers" (70). This commitment to appearing "normal" to "them," to the Bucks' investment in "renovating" themselves and appearing worthy of high property values — even if it means giving in to racist hegemony — warps their marriage in the end into a marriage with bad "plumbing," and love, not for each other, but for money and appearances.

As far as a "change in the present" (Cariou 730) goes, however, *Big Buck City* explores not only Jack and Barbara Buck's unhappy marriage, but also the repercussions of repressed horror: the horrific legacy of racism against Indigenous peoples in Canada. As much as they might prefer to conceal it, Jack and Barbara Buck are possessed by unspoken shame about their Indigenous heritage as they seek to disown their heritage and family, and dangerously embrace the racist implications of mainstream, North American, capitalist values as articulated in a typical North American "white Christmas." By trying to keep up with the Joneses, by trying to *be* the Joneses, they compromise the integrity — both spiritual and structural — of their "house."

Theatre reviewer Vit Wagner suggests that in the play Moses's "larger point [is that] materialism has alienated the Bucks from the traditional values of native culture." This interpretation has some merit, but I do *not* want to suggest that the unhappy Barbara Buck just needs to return to "tradition" in order to find happiness, when it is obvious she *is* occasionally capable of rare moments of sympathy for her distraught sister Martha. But what the Bucks *do* need is to reconsider what is important and "re-possess" their family "house"; for example, should they care

about their niece Lena having a stressful birth *less* than they care about keeping Barbara's rug clean? Even though he has had a lot to drink, should Jack really say or even *think*, "Fuck, Babsy, we're in luck. Lena's dying. We'll have to take care of the kid" (98)? These kinds of choices are not even necessarily about "traditional values of native culture" (Wagner), but more about the Bucks having let their own misdirected desires get in the way of maintaining meaningful relationships with members of their "house."

I hesitate to refer to the green spirit light and Ricky Raccoon as "trickster" figures because of the problematic academic history of the "trickster," as pointed out by Kristina Fagan, who reminds us that in Canada in the late 1990s,

Focusing on the trickster seemed to appeal to literary critics as an approach that was fittingly "Native." The trouble was that the trickster archetype was assumed to be an inevitable part of Indigenous cultures, and so the criticism paid little attention to the historical and cultural specifics of why and how particular Indigenous writers were drawing on particular mythical figures. (3)

However, as Fagan goes on to indicate: "The work of many Indigenous writers in Canada — including such influential figures as Thomas King, Tomson Highway, Beth Brant, Daniel David Moses, and Lenore Keeshig-Tobias — has included mythical figures that could be described as tricksters" (3-4). In addition, Moses's inclusion of an epigraph to the play that is an excerpt from Lenore Keeshig-Tobias's poem "Running on the March Wind," in which she writes,

the others said
LOOK there
goes Santa Claus

that's not Santa Claus
i said
that's Nanabush (5)

suggests that Nanabush does indeed have a presence in the play as a disguised Christmas figure.

Moses also has a very particular understanding of the "trickster" of which he makes overt usage in his writing, as he clarifies in his essay "The Trickster's Laugh," in which he offers his description of how he

came to be a co-founder of the artistic “strategic body” (Fagan 12) known as the “Committee to Re-Establish the Trickster.” Co-founded by Moses; musician, playwright, and novelist Tomson Highway; and “writer/story teller” Lenore Keeshig-Tobias (Moses, “Trickster’s” 146), the Committee was established to show a “different literature” (149), to counter the “official government ‘Indian’ label . . . stereotype” (148). Moses elaborates: “How seriously can you be taken as a human being or an artist if people think you’re heroic or stoic or romantic or a problem? We want people besides ourselves to be dissatisfied with those stereotypes” (148). The Committee’s understanding of the Trickster transforms the Trickster into a provocative muse figure for these three writers. Moses further clarifies their position vis-à-vis the “Trickster” in an interview with Wanda Campbell:

We’re all from three very different communities, but we found that the image of the trickster was one thing that we could agree on . . . in the way we were approaching writing as opposed to what our mainstream contemporaries were doing. . . . And the very name . . . we took from anthropologists; it has nothing to do particularly with native communities, but it’s a word anthropologists have used to describe a figure that exists in most of our literatures . . . that I don’t think is necessarily as nasty as a word like “trickster” would make you think. We decided it was important to put quotation marks wherever we could around characters that were tricksters that seemed to be this oversized embodiment of some of the extremes of human passion, and point out to people that you could actually learn what it is to be human by watching the trickster and often doing not what he does. (qtd. in Campbell)

Because *Big Buck City* contains within it the character Ricky Raccoon, who dons a Santa suit and creates chaos, one could easily argue that Ricky Raccoon is likely the “Nanabush” figure referred to in the epigraph. But the green spirit light that instigates the house’s animation also causes havoc; perhaps it is even *because* of the spirit light that Ricky Raccoon and the accompanying havoc possess the house. So while the house shows signs of being possessed by a spirit light, the possession is tinged with the playful echoes of jingle bells, Christmas “spirit,” and a particular kind of Committee to Re-Establish the Trickster “extreme.” And, most importantly, shit. Shit’s involvement in the play can possibly be justified by Highway’s explanation of how he envisions the “trickster”

as “a very sensual character — making love, eating — all those bodily functions, he celebrated them, he lived for them. The Trickster’s most frequent conversational partner was his anus” (qtd. in Wigston 8). Given Moses’s co-founding of the Committee to Re-Establish the Trickster, it would not be too great a stretch to assume that the trickster Moses envisions as the force behind the supernatural house in *Big Buck City* is also a force that would use shit as a teaching tool for Barbara and Jack Buck.

Ultimately, in Moses’s *Big Buck City*, the narrative that the monstrous house and the character Ricky Raccoon subvert is that of Barbara’s “white Christmas” and all of its attendant meanings — they force the Bucks to endure the choices experienced by the characters of *Coyote City* that I refer to at the beginning of this article: what Moses calls “the conflict between the material and the spiritual.” Indeed, *Big Buck City* is more of an “anti-Christmas” play,⁴ and continues “the indictment against Christianity” that Drew Hayden Taylor insists underlies Moses’s play *Coyote City* (Taylor, qtd. in Lindberg, “Interview” 224). Moses reappraises the Christmas “miracle” of the Virgin Mary’s immaculate conception by having Barbara’s niece Lena appear on Christmas Eve, possibly pregnant by the ghost of her murdered boyfriend Johnny, and accompanied by her Angel of the Lord, Clarisse Chrisjohn. With this play, Moses makes a statement about one of the central and damaging stories that possesses capitalist western culture: that the spiritual is always secondary, and that money can (and should?) buy everything.

But the play’s ending does not resolve the material/spiritual conflict neatly. With the evening in ruins and Ricky Raccoon having absconded with Lena’s baby, Barbara despairs at herself, saying, “It’s all my fault, isn’t it? I can’t even keep track of a baby” (103), and then turns her frustration onto the “mess” of her house: “And look at this place. What a mess. I made the whole mess myself. How can I expect company when I’m such a rotten housekeeper? . . . I’m ashamed of me, aren’t you?” (104). The Christmas tree then spontaneously catches fire. In a show of defeat and despair, Barbara disconnects from the mess of her house and her shattered family, and turns to the questionable comfort of the habitual: she decides that she will attend Mass the way she does every Christmas. As she prepares to leave, she exclaims at the “lovely” snow that has begun falling outside (108), saying to Jack, “We’ll have a white Christmas after all” with “[s]nowflakes, icicles, everything” (109). But

although it appears as though Barbara has opted for the “spiritual” rather than the “material” by going to church, really she seems to be opting for a “white” Christmas with the Joneses and surrendering to the “white, patriarchal, Christian . . . nation-state” (Goldman 21) they represent.

Similar to Barbara, at the end of the play Jack also turns to his correspondingly familiar and habitual choice in spite of the mess of Christmas and his recent knowledge that Lena has died on the way to the hospital. He retrieves his briefcase from the closet where Barbara has put it and “heads for the basement door” (109), presumably to do work in his home office even though at the beginning of the evening Barbara firmly took away his briefcase and told him “tonight you’re on holiday” (26). But unlike Barbara, Jack is forced into a major revelation by his “material” choice to opt for making money at his real-estate work in spite of the terrible evening: he drops his briefcase in shock when he opens the basement door to a “green glow,” and can only exclaim “Holy shit” (109) at what he sees below. Unlike Barbara, Jack in this moment is forced to confront a massive collision of the material and the spiritual: the fallen, or in truth *imploded*, House of Buck.

By the play’s end, the house has participated in the revelation of Jack and Barbara’s “shit” and the impacts of colonialism on their lives as manifested in their unhappy personal family relationships, their greed, and their refusal to accept the “spiritual information” (Lindberg, “Spirited” 211) presented by the supernatural house. In the play’s final scene, the house’s basement overflows with supernatural shit, revealing that if one refuses to acknowledge and accept one’s “shit” — whatever form that “shit” might take — one’s metaphorical toilet will, inevitably, overflow.

NOTES

¹ See Chris Dafoe’s “Theatre Review: *Big Buck City*,” published in *The Globe and Mail*, and Vit Wagner’s *Toronto Star* review, “We’re Farced to Want the Bucks to Stop.”

² I would like to thank Robyn Read for making this observation.

³ The “trickster” in Canadian literary criticism has a troubled critical history both as a word and anthropological concept, so I will discuss the term and Moses’s specific use of the concept of the “trickster” at length later in this article.

⁴ I am grateful to Nicholas McCormick for making this observation.

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