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ART AND RESISTANCE IN THOMAS KING'S *TRUTH & BRIGHT WATER*

> "You know what they keep in museums?"
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> "Old stuff from the past?"
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> "That's what they want you to think."
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> — Thomas King, *Truth & Bright Water,* 142

Thomas King's *Truth & Bright Water* (1999) both engages with and resists a colonial salvage paradigm—a Western ethnographic impulse to collect and preserve "authentic" relics of non-Western cultures that are seen as primitive and doomed to disappear in the face of "modernity." The salvage ethnographer, driven by a colonial attitude that David Garneau argues is "characterized by a drive to see," "to know," "to translate," and "to own," collects cultural objects, art, and even human remains, thus rendering them into artifacts (32). In the context of colonization, this process both relies on and reinforces a constructed, static, and limited view of indigeneity. The salvage paradigm not only shapes an impulse to collect—to steal—cultural objects but also imposes a binary notion of historical authenticity onto Indigenous cultures, wherein any cultural change or adaptation is seen as "debasement, impoverishment, or impurity" against the "vanishing," authentic culture that is seen as ultimately incongruent with the "modern" world (Wilson 2). King complicates these colonial narratives of indigeneity in *Truth & Bright Water* through the self-conscious, commodified performance of "Indian Days," Monroe Swimmer's art of reversal (his collection and de-collection, vanishing and un-vanishing), and through the novel's multiple, interwoven narratives of community and resistance.

Garneau's essay "Imaginary Spaces of Conciliation and Reconciliation" introduces his oil paintings *Aboriginal Curatorial Collective Meeting* and *Aboriginal Advisory Circle Meeting* alongside his theories of "screen objects" and "irreconcilable spaces." Garneau defines screen objects—or "artefakes"—as "trade goods that imitate core culture" to

"satiate Settler cravings for the sacred objects," but "give nothing essential away" (33). Garneau also discusses his own paintings as another kind of screen object that allows the viewer to "visualize Indigenous intellectual spaces that exist apart from a non-Indigenous gaze" (33). The two paintings, composed of empty yet suggestive speech bubbles, are meant to "show what happened" at Aboriginal gatherings "without giving anything away" (32).

These modes of representation and resistance are similarly enacted in King's novel. The self-conscious art and performances of Indian Days reflect a colonial construction of indigeneity and are intended to be consumed by an audience of tourists looking to acquire, photograph, or experience an "authentic" indigeneity. Elvin is a talented woodworker who uses his Indigenous identity for monetary gain. He is bitterly aware of the injustices of colonization—while urinating, he pointedly states that "this is the way we should have signed those treaties" (113). He is also aware of the fetishization of Indigenous cultural objects, or "traditional Indian stuff," which he crafts, signing his name "so they know it's authentic" (33). He emphasizes these contrary colonial impulses of oppression and collection, joking, "figured I'd put my treaty number on the card so there's no question" (34). Elvin sells his artwork at Indian Days alongside "beaded belt buckles, acrylic paintings of the mountains, drawings of old-time Indians on horseback, deer-horn knives, [and] bone chokers" (221). These items bear resemblance to the tourists' notions of "authentic" Indigenous culture, but are in fact self-conscious imitations of that historical notion, and meant to be trade goods rather than meaningful cultural objects. Edna sells her "secret" and "traditional" fry bread recipe over and over to the German tourists, putting her "Indian face on" and gesturing dramatically (223). When Tecumseh—Elvin's son and the narrator of *Truth & Bright Water*—asks Edna how much she sells her bread for, she replies, "all I can say [. . .] is that I've still got my pride" (227). Edna and Elvin's performance of selling a constructed identity while retaining that which is important and personal aligns Indian Days with Garneau's theory of "screen objects"; Indian Days is an important community event, but the culture that is for sale and the meaningful interactions between the characters exist on separate planes. The "artefakes" for sale and the spectacle of the buffalo "shooting" help screen the more intimate interactions of community members from the acquisitive impulse and gaze of the tourists.

The characters are not only screened from the tourists by the constructed spectacle of Indian Days; they are also not fully revealed to the reader. While the tourists are busy with the vendors and watching the buffalo "shooting," Rebecca tells a

creation story inside Tecumseh's grandmother's tent. While Rebecca speaks in Cherokee, Tecumseh's grandmother—who does not speak Cherokee—knows nonetheless that it is a creation story. There is "more to a story than just words," his grandmother says (232). Tecumseh leaves as Rebecca begins her story and so the characters are left in a private space, screened from a non-Indigenous gaze. Just as in Garneau's paintings, an Indigenous intellectual space is visualized, yet the colonial gaze driven "to see," "to know," "to translate," and "to own" is left without full comprehension (32).

Monroe Swimmer is also at Indian Days. He approaches Tecumseh in a tourist outfit and with a camera, asking, "Hey, Chief. How much to take your picture?" (229). Swimmer continually reverses and subverts the colonial gaze, and challenges the static notion of indigeneity created by a cultural paradigm of salvage ethnography. Swimmer's artwork resists commodification and rejects a fatalistic victim narrative. He dismisses his early work of "giant canvases filled with swollen, shadowy figures stuffed into distorted police cars and army tanks, chasing pastel animals and neon Indians at murderous angles across long, dark stretches on prairie landscape" as "Stinko. Reactionary. Predictable" (28; 137). He instead claims that what he is "really good at [is] restoration" (142). Swimmer "restores" the nineteenth-century landscapes by painting villages and "Indians" back into the paintings (142). He paints the church out of the landscape, restores iron buffalo to the plains, puts his long black wig on Tecumseh's head, and says it's "just like the old days" (143). This refusal to vanish into the past, this project of reversing and re-imagining the impact of colonialism, means that Swimmer engages actively with the present, and thus with the questions of authenticity and continuity.

Salvage ethnography posits an Indigenous identity that is always in the past, or is always succumbing to the progression of the future. Michael Wilson argues that there is a dominant perception of assimilation as a destructive process to an authentic or pure Indigenous identity, and cites James Wilson's claim that in the colonial mindset, if Indigenous people "*fail* to vanish, if they change and adapt instead, then, by definition, they are not really Native Americans" (3). Lum embodies this violent and destructive view of assimilation. Lum, covered in bruises that are "yellow" and "the colour of blood, dark purple, and black," longs for a return to a pre-contact past. He cannot look away from the garbage dump, a symbol of the flawed present-day. Lum's desire for an "authentic" pre-contact existence in a contemporary (post)colonial society is an untenable fantasy—one that demands death in the face of a "binary opposition of purity and impurity, authenticity and inauthenticity" (Wilson xiv). Swimmer resists a

constructed authenticity and instead embraces a contemporary re-imagination of Indigenous identity—a wig that can be taken on and off, painting his face red, black, white, blue and yellow, making iron buffalo, and putting kite birds in the sky (King 202). "You know what they keep in museums?" he asks Tecumseh. "Old stuff from the past?" he replies. Swimmer then tells him, "That's what they want you to think" (142). Swimmer exists in an imperfect contemporary society. His act of de-collecting the human remains from museums reflects this imperative. He does not return the bones to a pristine, pre-contact fantasy, but into the river that is polluted by medical waste, and thereby into a problematic contemporary society.

Two performances or acts of resistance conclude the novel. Swimmer's final act, the giveaway of his collection of objects "de-collected" from museums, follows Indian Days after nightfall. The giveaway is a site of resistance to the colonial impulse of collection and consumption that just occurred at Indian Days. The other final act of resistance is the re-imagination of *Snow White* with an all-Indigenous cast by the community theatre. Wilson argues that "Indigenous writers of contemporary fiction are generally less concerned with assimilation than they are with the power of appropriating and revising non-Indigenous forms to create a literature of resistance" (3). The use of a contemporary play by a group of artists is not damaging to a notion of cultural authenticity, but is rather a tool for the community to produce a subversive political satire. Wilson looks to Pueblo author Simon J. Ortiz, who "appropriates the concept of authenticity itself away from its binary inflections, and instead toward a definition based on community acts of 'strength and continuance'" (3). Both the giveaway and the theatre performance may be read as similar acts that attend to the vitality and interconnection of the community.

These acts are dramatic performances of resistance within the novel that invite an analytical gaze. However, Garneau claims that "primary sites of resistance" are often not the "open battles between the [. . .] colonized and the dominant culture, but the perpetual, active refusal of complete engagement: [. . .] to refuse translation and full explanations" (29). Just as Rebecca's creation story was not fully disclosed, many "gatherings," "kitchen-table conversations" (29), and private struggles are left hidden from the critical gaze. Wilson argues that, "every culture has at its centre a set of objects and spaces that are designated as being beyond trade" (32). For King, this is the family and its intimate private existence. The most private details of Helen, Aunt Cassie, Elvin, and Swimmer's lives are not revealed to the reader. Garneau notes that "many residential school survivors will not tell their stories," as the trauma is private

and thus, "not for public consumption; they are not subjects of analysis" (34). As he states in "Godzilla vs. Post-Colonial," King is wary of the term "post-colonial literature" in application to his writing. He states, "the term itself assumes that the starting point for that discussion is the advent of Europeans in North America," which is a starting point that "assumes that the struggle between guardian and ward is the catalyst for contemporary Native literature, providing those of us who write with method and topic" ("Godzilla vs. Post-Colonial" 11–12).

There is evidence in the novel that the experience of living in contemporary North America, across borders and reservations, is difficult, and that the negotiation of relationships, identity, and community in this environment is challenging. The spectre of lost love and lost children looms over the characters, and in particular, looms over the unresolved and unrevealed trauma of Aunt Cassie's "Mia." Mia's story remains unknown to the reader, as King refuses to write it. Instead, he hints at the intense intimacy and connection that binds the family together. Garneau writes that "in the exchange of stories, gestures, touches, thoughts, feelings, and laughter the very nature of contemporary Aboriginality is subtly tested, reconsidered, provisionally confirmed, or gently reconfigured, composed, and played in rehearsal" (34). He argues that "this requires separate discursive territories," spaces that King also similarly creates and defends for his characters, away from sites of open resistance (34).

Truth & Bright Water holds a powerful and complex family narrative that runs half-revealed at its centre. This private intimacy is evident in Helen and Cassie's late-night talk when Helen brings out the suggestive suitcase of baby clothes (123). While this potential/lost baby is obviously a subject of private hurt and loss for Cassie, and something of curiosity to Tecumseh, no history of trauma is confessed to the reader. Instead, the sisters stay up and talk between themselves and wash each other's hair. This moment, like Rebecca's creation story, is not fully revealed to Tecumseh, and is therefore screened from the reader. It is not a moment to be consumed or analyzed. Instead, it exists just outside the reader's knowledge, as Tecumseh perches on the rafter, listening to "the water running in the sink" and the sound of Auntie Cassie singing (123).

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