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Playing Indian: Performance of "Indianness" in Thomas King's *Truth and Bright Water*

The creation of Canada was the creation of the "Indian." British and French colonists arriving in Eastern Canada regarded North America as *terra nullus*: empty land, free for the taking. When they discovered (or rather, admitted) that the land was not uninhabited, that in fact these quaint "naked savages" could be found from coast to coast, it became necessary to categorize them. Before the colonization that would lead to Canada's creation began, there were no "Indians." That label is a colonial invention imposed on many peoples and nations that already existed, and to use it is to think of these peoples through an "English," and thus historically colonial, lens. Perhaps inevitably, given the prejudices and assumptions the colonists brought with them, the "Indian" that newborn Canada described to itself (and continues to describe; see King's "What Is It About Us That You Don't Like?") was not the "Indian" of reality. (In fact, that phrase even takes on the cast of an oxymoron).

Many characters in *Truth and Bright Water*, white and Indian alike, exhibit a need to perform or construct a greater degree of "Indianness" (Shanley) than they possess in reality. "Indianness" refers to the key markers and perceived essential traits of the mythic Indian. In its most extreme forms, Indianness can become mere stereotype and kitsch, or disguised racism. Thomas King refers to this mythic Indian in his book *The Truth About Stories* as "the literary Indian, the dying Indian, the imaginative construct" (34). It is an archetype that by its rather slippery nature is immune to absolute definition; since it is generated by the imagination, its form is elastic and subjective. Most North Americans carry a sense of this mythic Indian whether they are aware of its construction or not. This invented, romantic, and Platonic ideal of the Indian—and it is "Indian," not "Aboriginal" or "Indigenous" or any other, later term—is what Baudrillard would term a "simulacrum": a representation of something which never truly existed.

Shanley speaks of the popular ideal of the Indian as a perceived American privilege. "Pretending to be Indian or believing that it is possible to 'know' what it means to be 'Indian' is something Americans believe to be within their purview" (Shanley 689), she remarks. More than this, "for more than a century summer day camps for non-Indian children around the nation have enacted 'Indian rituals' of belonging and endurance. Such 'play' is foundational to American democracy and identity" (Shanley 678). In other words, imitating a pre-American culture is necessary for feeling American: the construct "mirror[s] their own distorted images back to them" (689). In Canada, the practice is not taken to such ridiculous and cordial extremes, but non-Indigenous Canadians are often guilty of the same basic conceit: that they have the ability and the right to define, describe, and dictate the nature of displaced Indigenous peoples. What is

more, the resulting construct is decidedly imaginative and sometimes blatantly fictional, as Shanley shows repeatedly in her extended discussion of Jamake Highwater, whom she quotes as writing "I am Indian only because I say I am Indian" (682).

King does not simply note the historical phenomenon of constructing this mythic or hyper-Indian, but he also makes the practice central to the tragedy of *Truth and Bright Water*. Most of the characters in the novel are indigenous, and thus their need to perform Indianness seems redundant, but, of course, the Indian of performance is an image without an original—a hyper-idealized fantasy. In "The Precession of Simulacra," Baudrillard argues that there is no practical difference between the original and the simulacrum: they are indistinguishable. The simulated Indian has worked its way so far into the cultural imagination that it is extremely difficult to say what is invention and what is historical fact, or what new developments should enter which category. But the fact that simulated and original Indianness are blurred together does not mean that the two have the same effects on the world or on the people in it. Thomas King explores the effects of such simulation in *Truth and Bright Water*: various characters in the novel perform various types of Indianness, each type fraught with simulated, socially constructed aspects of the invented hyper-Indian.

Monroe Swimmer, of all the characters in *Truth and Bright Water*, performs Indianness most deliberately. As a trickster-figure, he cheerfully inserts Indian scenes into paintings with no clear cultural connection to them: "there was an Indian village on the lake, slowly coming up through the layers of paint" (King 138). He disguises his own agency in the action of telling, like showing a magic trick to a child, though given the book's other instances of magical realism it is just as possible that he may really have been witness to a spontaneous resurrection. He also, in his travels, collects bones of "Indian children" (King 265) to bring them to Truth, "the centre of the universe" (265). Whatever nation they belonged to in life, Monroe inters them in Blackfoot country. Their bones go in the river, and their likenesses go into natural scenes because the hyper-Indian is nature personified, man in the state of nature.

Monroe's particular performance of hyper-Indianness is pan-indigenist, universalizing the label "Indian" to any and all indigenous groups. Perhaps, though, this is his prerogative, or even his responsibility; the Cherokee ghosts seem to lack a trickster of their own, and so Monroe may simply be picking up the slack. Coyote is a trickster in many Plains nations, so in this King is not without precedent.

In another performance of Indianness, Lum attempts to heal the emotional wounds his father dealt to him (and acquired by his mother's disappearance) by armouring himself in the role of Indian warrior. Kicked out of his father's house, he goes to camp by the bridge in a clumsy approximation of a Plains Indian vision quest. Out on the prairie with Tecumseh, Lum strips naked and smears himself with mud, which probably is not a historical Blackfoot practice—

riding a motorcycle certainly is not—but is exactly in line with the twisted ideal Lum emulates. As Lum attempts to become a "warrior," however, it becomes clear that he is a simulation without an original, and thus is estranged from the web of relations and relationships that would ground him in community and environment. He pretends so intensely to be the fierce, independent Indian hunter and fighter figure that he further isolates himself, and his aggression becomes self-reflexive. On the bridge, just before his suicide, Lum flagellates himself with a piece of rebar and repeats his vow to "keep on going until I feel like stopping" (272). This self-abuse faintly echoes the Sun Dance: the blood from his chest and his cry to "lean into it" (270) recall the part of that ceremony when the participant must lean back and pull at the cords tied to the hooks piercing his chest until they come free. It is one of the tests of strength through which Lum often puts himself: his repeated instruction to Tecumseh to "time me" frequently reminds the reader of Lum's competition with himself.

Monroe and Lum perform hyper-Indianness constantly, but, during Indian Days, the whole community participates: Tecumseh's father Elvin sells so-called "traditional" trinkets to European tourists, Franklin organizes a modernized buffalo hunt with motorcycles and paintball guns, and Edna sells "the secret of authentic frybread" to German "wannabes" (222-3). Some of the aspects of Indianness for sale are indeed authentic, like the frybread and the tradition of woodcarving (if not the carvings themselves), but they become simulacra simply by commodification since the original context that is so crucial to an Aboriginal worldview (as defined by Leroy Little Bear) changes drastically in the process.

All these attempts at reclaiming history that result in parody can be characterized as attempts to regain a properly Indigenous worldview. Little Bear writes that

> [c]olonization created a fragmentary worldview among Aboriginal peoples. By force, terror, and educational policy, it attempted to destroy the Aboriginal worldview—but failed. Instead, colonization left a heritage of jagged worldviews among Indigenous peoples. They no longer had an Aboriginal worldview, nor did they adopt a Eurocentric worldview. Their consciousness became a random puzzle, a jigsaw puzzle that each person has to attempt to understand (Little Bear 84-5).

We see these "attempts to understand" in King's novel, but they are largely met with failure—it is, after all, a tragedy. Lum pays most dearly, while Monroe is so ridiculous that he makes us question where the trickster's antics end and mere insanity begins. Indian Days remain what they have always been: an economically-driven event whose significance is lost on most of its participants, both locals and visitors. The problem is this: with pre-contact Blackfoot culture all but obliterated, or changed beyond recognition by colonial structures, the novel's characters

mistakenly turn to cultural stereotypes—simulations—in an attempt to regain it. While the characters may not know the difference, it is clear to the reader: both Truth and Bright Water suffer from a lack of community (or communality) or an internal disjointedness that is in sharp contrast to the group-centric values of Little Bear's "Aboriginal philosophy" (78). In fact, Little Bear details an excellent account of what the people in King's novel lack, and central to this model is the multifaceted concept of wholeness: "Wholeness is like a flower with four petals. When it opens, one discovers strength, sharing, honesty, and kindness. Together these four petals create balance, harmony, and beauty" (79). In his essay, Little Bear carefully details the interrelation of these sub-concepts, but the end result is a tight-knit community based on mutual goodwill and flexibility. The Aboriginal community favours "a positive rather than a negative approach to social control" (80), meaning that, ideally, members of the community do not wish to break its rules—they do not simply fear the punishment that would follow if they did. Little Bear contrasts Aboriginal values with Eurocentric ones: Eurocentric values, he claims, dialectically oppose the values and philosophy of Aboriginal society.

Skeptics could accuse Little Bear of creating a pair of straw men for his argument, but such an objection would in any case be irrelevant here. Quite aside from any implicit or explicit critique of Western society, Little Bear succeeds at enumerating a set of positives: a loving and attentive community, a family system where relatives teach children, and a society that bases its rules on voluntary participation not external coercion. These values are absent from the world of *Truth and Bright Water*—and pointedly so, since Little Bear writes specifically of Plains tribes like the Blackfoot nation.

Although they know it ends up in the river, Elvin and Franklin continue to dump medical waste into the landfill, despite the societal importance of connection to the land. The community that is supposed to be attentive and caring fails to save Lum or even help him in any meaningful fashion. Tecumseh offers him a place to stay, but all the others can do is offer a vague, half-hearted chiding of the abusive Franklin. "'When you see Lum,' says Wilfred, 'tell him me and Eddie said his old man is a hard ass'" (King 199), and that is seemingly the best Wilfred can do. This is especially difficult to accept, considering this man is currently "sitting around in the sun outside the fence, waiting" (198) at the job gate. In this regard, then, Tecumseh is slightly more virtuous than other community members, but he fails in other areas: notably, in his attentiveness. Attentiveness is another Aboriginal value, as described by Little Bear, but Tecumseh is quite (and, on occasion, stunningly) unobservant. The interactions of the adults in the book are a half-glimpsed mystery to him. Aunt Cassie's past, his mother's involvement with Monroe, his father's smuggling and its connection to the trash in the river, and even the sight of Monroe with a woman—probably Tecumseh's mother—before his very eyes manage to escape his notice. (Denial is tantamount to inattention, if not worse.) Aboriginal philosophy is supremely concerned

with relationships, and Tecumseh's sensitivity to them is significantly abysmal. Relationships are essential, since they are how the whole community is constituted; also important is possessing a wide skill base, which according to Little Bear is key to the value of "independence" (79). Generalism in Truth and Bright Water is perverted to simply, in Elvin's words, "[w]ork[ing] for anybody for the right money" (King 198)—a form of generalism, but hardly one conducive to independence.

To reiterate: Shanley notes that creating fictitious Indians and performing them is a time-honoured American practice (and one essentially similar to attitudes in Canada). Such social construction, having reached a certain scale, becomes simulation in the Baudrillardian sense, but with the caveat that a difference in practical effects is still apparent. King makes the implications of this cultural practice of simulation the only recourse for characters who have lost touch with their hereditary culture. Simulation is the symptom; the disease is that loss of cultural values, which is best articulated by Leroy Little Bear. King's novel reaches something of an impasse: due to the insidious and convincing nature of the simulacrum, his characters cannot find a way out of the feedback loop of dissatisfaction and misguided remedy of the simulation of hyper-Indianness. Helen's words to Tecumseh, "[y]ou know I love you. You know it wasn't your fault" (281), while touching, are only treating the symptom, or rather the symptom of the symptom, since Lum killed himself only as a result of something symptomatic of a deeper flaw.

Fortunately, this impasse is not irresolvable, as evidenced by Shanley. In writing about America's love of performing Indianness, Shanley, like Little Bear and King, comes to a conclusion of fragmented consciousness or cognitive dissonance, but this time in a political context:

> a claim to Indian cultural roots places the individual in a political position (whether or not the person making such a declaration recognizes it as such), and […] individuals and groups that suffer racism intensely counter its effects with a double-consciousness, as W. E. B. DuBois termed it. Indian people who have known the legacy of America's racist history will develop a double-consciousness to preserve their right to be Indian (Shanley 696).

She refers to "American Indian writer[s]" (696) but quickly generalizes to "Indian people." It is true that the Aboriginal person suffering from jagged worldviews, or the Indian person with a double-consciousness, has a harder time than the Westerner or the descendant of colonists. (Perhaps the descendants of both have the hardest time of all.) To be indigenous in Canada (or the United States) is to be a political minority, one that is required to be vocal in order to champion itself but also, sadly, in order to provide entertainment (see Thomas King's essay, "Let

Me Entertain You"). Little Bear is careful to include "*both* the colonizer and the colonized" (85, emphasis added) in his description of jagged worldviews colliding; however, it is certain that the clash he speaks of is unequal. The Aboriginal comes out worst, even if one awards them the moral victory (if such a concept can even apply)—they have been far more detrimentally affected by colonialism than vice versa. In Shanley's view, indigenous people must exist in two worlds simultaneously, or in Lum's case, choose between apathy and suicide. This "anger and pain of having to account for who you are" (Shanley 695) is cognitive dissonance on a truly massive scale.

Shanley's political emphasis brings a rather theoretical discussion back to the realm of social necessity. Her project is identifying and promoting authentic Native voices. She points to the "responsive[ness] to Indian communities" (696) and to "a specific language or history" (697)—as opposed to the invented history of the hyper-Indian—as markers of this authenticity. King is such an author: responsive to a broader community but dedicated to the same basic project. Despite her political focus, Shanley does not discount the power of fiction, writing that "the breadth and depth of human suffering…perhaps find[s] best expression in creative literature" (677). Shanley never doubts that we can learn "to read 'real' Indians" (697), but acknowledges that doing so is difficult. In the end, identifying authentic Native voices—and thereby resisting the simulation that ends so disastrously in *Truth and Bright Water*—requires "a subtlety of mind, a clarity of purpose. Better many voices speak at once and we learn how to listen than allow only one voice to ventriloquize our own love song back to us" (697). In other words, all must be attentive, or the result will be tragedy.

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