

## **TRICK OF THE AESTHETIC APOCALYPSE: ETHICS OF LOSS AND RESTORATION IN THOMAS KING'S *TRUTH AND BRIGHT WATER***

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### **Abstract / Résumé**

In this paper, I examine the critical issue between theory and practice in Thomas King's *Truth and Bright Water*. I first examine the novel's structures and levels of meaning, before interpreting the symbolism and irony. These aspects of the novel further set up the critique of authenticity, the role of the artist, and the questions posed by King's recourse to magic to achieve his aesthetic transformations. All of these issues, while raising ethical problems for an Indigenous criticism, nonetheless reveal the complexity and creativity of Native writers and their art.

L'auteur examine la question importante de la théorie et de la pratique dans le roman de Thomas King intitulé *Truth and Bright Water*. L'article examine d'abord la structure et les niveaux de sens du roman, avant d'en interpréter le symbolisme et l'ironie. Ces aspects du roman établissent de plus la critique de l'authenticité, le rôle de l'artiste et les questions posées par le recours par King à la magie pour obtenir ses transformations esthétiques. Bien qu'elles soulèvent des problèmes éthiques pour une critique autochtone, toutes ces questions soulignent la complexité et la créativité des écrivains autochtones et de leur art.

Native literatures are often the subject of Western theories that continue to impose colonial assumptions, even when attempting to break free from those assumptions. Responding to this situation, Native writers and critics have called for interpretive models that are more ethical in representing their literatures. In his essays and fiction, Thomas King challenges Western forms of criticism and provides literary concepts that more responsibly consider the context of Native literatures. King's arguments have been groundbreaking for Native writers and the development of Indigenous forms of criticism. However, King's own creative work at times can lead to a problematic application of his own theories, for his concept of Native writing often requires the artist to subvert conventions, including those of Native traditions.

In "Godzilla vs. Post-Colonial," King argues that Native writing is not post-colonial, because "the term itself assumes that the starting point for that discussion is the advent of Europeans in North America" (11). The theory does not recognize that "the idea of post-colonial writing effectively cuts us off from our traditions, traditions which have come down to us through our cultures in spite of colonization" (12). In response, King prefers the terms "tribal, interfusional, polemical, and associational to describe the range of Native writing" (12). The term "tribal" refers to stories accessible only to specific Indigenous communities, while "interfusional" describes works that combine oral traditions and contemporary written forms, and "polemical" indicates writing that represents conflicts between Native and non-Native cultures. King's work involves all of these terms to some degree, but the main form of his fiction writing can be described by his own definition of "associational":

Associational literature, most often, describes a Native community. While it may also describe a non-Native community, it avoids centering the story on the non-Native community or on a conflict between the two cultures, concentrating instead on the daily activities and intricacies of Native life and organizing the elements of plot along a rather flat narrative line that ignores the ubiquitous climaxes and resolutions that are so valued in non-Native literature. (14)

At the same time, while King wants to move away from Western conventions and focus on a specific Native context, he also wants to avoid a one-centered, nationalist approach to Native cultures. Representing various Native societies, King states that his critical terms "tend to be less centered, and do not, within the terms themselves, privilege one culture over the other" (12). King reinforces this concern in *All My Relations* when he suggests that the term "pan-Native" may provide "Native writers with common structures, themes, and characters which can effec-

tively express traditional and contemporary concerns about the world” (x). By working at this level, King, at least in theory, can situate his stories in the context of a Native community and also reach a more universal audience, while maintaining the integrity of an ethical Indigenous criticism.

King’s *Truth and Bright Water* puts his theories to the test. The novel depicts life on the Bright Water reserve next to the small town of Truth, divided by the border, with Bright Water on the Canadian side and Truth on the American. Bright Water is a fictional reserve, but the scenery, wildlife, and local customs, in addition to King’s years living in southern Alberta, suggest that it is a Blackfoot community near the Alberta/Montana border. Nonetheless, the fact that the reserve is fictional and unnamed in the novel allows King to associate the community with several Plains Indian cultures in general, as part of his pan-Native approach to writing. In any case, with his associational style, King manages to create the sense of a specific Native community throughout the novel, as the teen-aged narrator describes the day-to-day lives of his relatives and other community members, all of whom are preparing for the annual Indian Days festival. Beneath the surface of this flat narrative line, though, King also embeds a symbolic structure with allusions to historical heroes and the arrival of Cherokee figures from the colonial past. These allusions and symbols allow King to draw on specific tribal histories as well as reach a broader context by interfusing several cultural traditions, colonial conflicts, and historical tragedies. Furthermore, through the figure of Monroe Swimmer, King reveals political, religious, and aesthetic problems that the colonial legacy has left for Native communities. Monroe is an artist who discovers that nineteenth-century landscape artists painted over the images of Native communities, representing the pre-colonial landscape as empty of civilization. However, after restoring the landscape paintings to their “Aboriginal” condition, Monroe takes drawerloads of stolen bones and returns home to repatriate them to their ancestral lands. He also paints over the local church, making it “disappear,” and erects bison sculptures with the belief that they will “magically” become real.

However, although King’s associational and pan-Native approach represents “the intricacies of Native life,” his portrayal of the community actually raises obstacles to an Indigenous interpretive model when he depicts how the community now reproduces its traditions through tourism and popular culture. Furthermore, his satirical treatment of Monroe completely disregards any concern for specific cultural and historical contexts that would legitimate Monroe’s acts of restoration. Equally problematic is Monroe’s, and King’s, turn to a concept of magic that blurs

the line between imagination and reality to achieve their artistic transformations—a provocative move on one hand, but a facile aesthetic deception on the other. In this sense, Monroe, the artist, becomes a reflection of King, the author, and the novel ends up questioning if King's creative writing risks undermining his own critical theory and therefore ethically compromising an Indigenous form of criticism.

At the same time, despite this concern, it may very well be this radically self-reflective condition that makes King's work effective overall. To address this critical issue between King's theory and practice, I will first examine the novel's structures and levels of meaning, before interpreting the symbolism and irony. These aspects of the novel further set up the critique of authenticity, the role of the artist, and the problems posed by King's recourse to magic. All of these issues, while raising problems for an Indigenous criticism, nonetheless reveal the complexity and creativity of Native writers and their art.

### **Elegiac Structure and the Disappearing Race**

King structures the novel with a series of disappearances, some of which are sudden and remain unresolved until the object of loss reappears, if it does at all. At the beginning of the story, the narrator and his cousin, Lum, are bewildered by a mysterious figure that appears and then vanishes with "no sound, no flashing ripples on the water, nothing to mark her fall" (11). All throughout the narrative, people, vehicles, animals, and features of the landscape continually disappear and reappear. The central reversal of the novel is the disappearance of the (physical) church and the reappearance of the bison herds on the land. All of these events, though, are framed by the recurring disappearances of Lum. Lum "vanishes over the edge" (16) of the bridge near the beginning of the novel. Later, as he is racing the train, Lum "begins to fade" (76), and his silhouette transforms: "Against the arch of a cloudless sky, he looks like a dark bird gliding low across the land" (77). Lum is training for the annual race at Indian Days, as the narrator watches him run off into the distance: "I climb to the top of the fence to see if I can spot him, but he's already dropped down the far side of the slope and disappeared into the landscape" (166-67). Often, the narrator is uncertain whether Lum will return: "there's no telling how far he'll go this time before he decides to turn around and come home" (167). Moreover, while Lum is the central character who is lost in the novel, he also struggles with the loss of his mother: "Sometimes Lum remembers that his mother is dead, and sometimes he forgets" (15). At one point, Lum has a moment of realization and accepts her death: "She's never coming back!" (187); later, though, he thinks his mother has reappeared: "She's come home"

(239). This pattern of disappearance and reappearance forms the narrative tension throughout the novel and reveals conflicts in the forms of consolation for the loss of loved ones and cultural traditions.

Within this framework of loss and recovery, Lum is also the most abused of the characters, and this abuse reveals a difficult relation between appearance and reality. The beatings he endures from his father are not hidden, his bruises “the color of blood, dark purple and black” (161), but they are also overlooked by the community as a whole. Furthermore, because of his abuse and his struggle over his lost mother, Lum often acts recklessly and even contemplates suicide – he does not go through with it only because “[t]here aren’t enough bullets” (239). The most hampering injury Lum receives from his father is a limp, destroying his goal of competing in the annual race (158). Although Lum is persistent in his training, at one point he poses an ominous question when he turns and faces Bright Water: “You know what I’m going to do when I hit the finish line?” (272). The response to this question crystallizes the image of the *disappearing race*, as the narrator can see Lum running “until the curve of the bridge begins its descent into Bright Water and Lum and Soldier [the narrator’s dog] disappear over the edge” (272). The reader is left with a wistful cluster of images: “the bridge is empty, and all I see in the distance is the lights of Bright Water and all I see below me is the fog. And all I hear is the wind and the faint strains of the piano rising out of the land with the sun” (273). Tragically, Lum’s reaction to the loss of his mother and the abuse he endures is his own emotional emptiness and physical disappearance. With Lum’s death, the narrator begins to mourn and contemplate Lum’s final moments: “The water here is deep and black, and I wonder how it would feel to plunge such a great distance and have nothing to break your fall” (277). Sadly, after Lum’s funeral, the narrator acknowledges that his loss will never be replaced: “I miss Lum. [...] And I miss Soldier” (281). Lum’s death represents the final disappearance of an already beaten heroic spirit—a condition that belies the community’s attempt to restore past traditions at the Indian Days festival.

Indeed, underlying this elegiac narrative is a broader tragic history of Aboriginal leaders and nations. Here, King alludes to histories outside the context of the community depicted in the novel with the figures of Tecumseh and Geronimo, as well as the Cherokee Trail of Tears. The narrator is called Tecumseh, the same name as the Shawnee resistance leader.<sup>1</sup> The historical Tecumseh was a great leader who, along with a multi-nation Native alliance, helped defend Canada during the War of 1812 and also attempted to establish an independent Indian nation. Ironically, the narrator’s name, as Ridington explains, also alludes to the “Civil

War general William Tecumseh Sherman, whose ‘march to the sea’ devastated former Cherokee homelands in Georgia” (291). Related to the figure of Tecumseh and the Indian removals is the historical leader Geronimo, represented by Lum.<sup>2</sup> Like Tecumseh in the east, Geronimo was one of the last unifying forces to stand against the aggressive dismantling of the powerful tribe system in the American west. The defeat of both leaders represents the end of large-scale resistance and the loss of a widespread sovereign homeland. Indeed, the capture and removal of Geronimo to Florida historically refer to the larger Indian removals of the age.

King focuses all of these allusions on the Cherokee Trail of Tears, particularly with Rebecca, the girl who is looking for her lost duck.<sup>3</sup> Daniel Justice states: “Bright Water’s Cherokee presence is that of Removal, and of the survival of those scattered by the Trail” (178). Justice further claims: “In history and fiction, Rebecca stands as the representative survivor of Removal” (173). The narrator strongly identifies with Rebecca, who has a ghostly presence, as she appears and disappears throughout the novel. Indeed, like Lum, Rebecca disappears without saying good-bye to the narrator: “I would have liked to have said good-bye to Rebecca, to tell her that I was sorry about her duck, that it might turn up yet, that I knew what it was like to lose things” (280). Like all the symbols in the novel, the duck represents something far more profound than what appears on the surface. Justice argues: “King’s exploration of these issues can be read as an extended comment on a single question, but one that ripples outward with urgency: How do we re-establish bonds of nationhood when they have been damaged or severed for generations?” (169). The duck’s role in restoring Cherokee nationhood lies in its mythology. Justice explains:

In this narrative, the duck takes the place of Dayunisi, the Little Water Beetle of Cherokee tradition who dives below the great waters of the Middle World and brings up muddy earth [...]. In some other Cherokee versions of the story, a duck or other animal does dive for the mud, but s/he drowns in the depths; only Dayunisi survives to emerge with the foundation for the world. [...] King’s concern with survival literally surfaces again in the novel, and it’s the duck, not Dayunisi, who is named the worldmaker. But while the duck resurfaces to create the world, it vanishes from the narrative once the Cherokees start for Oklahoma, and its guardian, Rebecca, searches still. (174)

Thus, as we follow this symbol deeper below the surface of the text, a specific tribal theoretical approach emerges.<sup>4</sup> In this way, Justice ex-

plains, King is able to “exercise the moral imperative of tribal continuity” by basing his pan-Native concerns on Cherokee history, mythology, and the “*consciousness of Removal*” (171).

### **Authenticity, Popular Culture, and Commodity**

Despite the allusions to the loss and recovery of a specific tribal sense of nationhood, the subject of the novel is still an unspecified community whose traditional cultural forms have been replicated as trinkets and commercialized in popular culture. In the novel, the enduring legacy of colonialism has also become one of mainstream media with a heightened sense of global tourism, and King satirically depicts the community’s restoration of their traditional customs as a theme park filled with popular stereotypes. One character, Lucy, says with sarcasm, “Indian Days are the only time we make any money without having to fill in a form” (23). Elvin, the narrator’s father, also comments on the situation: “Everybody’s going crazy over traditional Indian stuff” (33). Elvin further remarks on the global mass production of cultural artifacts: “sign[ your] name” “so they know it’s authentic. [...] A lot of this stuff comes out of Japan and Taiwan, so it’s hard to tell unless you got a card” (33). However, the toy coyotes that the narrator’s father carves end up dumped into the garbage, along with the mashed corn and chicken fat (38). The idea of the “authentic” relates to the recovery of the past, but this past has become a commodity for the rest of the world: “The tourists who show up for Indian Days can get almost anything they want. [...] And all of it, according to the signs that everyone puts up, is ‘authentic’ and ‘traditional’” (221). Hence, King shows how “authentic” Native cultures have often been misappropriated in the modern world, overtaken by the desire to retain a sense of the past as a mass producible and disposable artifact.<sup>5</sup>

King addresses the problem with the entire notion of the authenticity of Native culture and identity in *All My Relations*:

Authenticity can be a slippery and limiting term when applied to Native literature for it suggests cultural and political boundaries past which we should not let our writing wander. And, if we wish to stay within these boundaries, we must not only write about Indian people and Indian culture, we must also deal with the concept of “Indian-ness,” a nebulous term that implies a set of expectations that are used to mark out that which is Indian and that which is not. (xv)

In the novel, King portrays this critical view of authenticity with the depiction of the modern assimilation of Native identity into the Hollywood image, as the characters continually reference the world and themselves

through movies and popular culture. For example, Monroe's hair reminds the narrator of "Graham Green's hair in *Dances with Wolves*" (47); as well, when Lum paints himself, the narrator remarks how "[h]e looks like the Indians you see at the Saturday matinee" (238). Furthermore, Carol Millerfeather is planning to put on *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, but with Indians instead of dwarfs (23), and Lucy wants to be like Marilyn Monroe. Lucy believes that Marilyn was an Indian (20), because "[s]he died young, of drugs. Sounds like an Indian to me" (211). Conducting her primary research on the Internet, Lucy has developed an elaborate theory that Marilyn's father also had a son, Elvis Presley: "Elvis actually played an Indian in one of his movies" (213). Lucy also attempts to bleach her hair to resemble Marilyn Monroe, for reasons the narrator explains: "Lucy said it wasn't just the physical look she was after. 'Marilyn was ashamed of being Indian,' she said. 'That's why she bleached her hair'" (212). Although her theory is absurd, Lucy is making a certain point: she bleaches her hair "[s]o Marilyn can see that bleaching your hair doesn't change a thing" (213). On one hand, Lucy's act of changing her appearance is an attempt to erase the "Indian-ness" from her identity. However, as King has pointed out, the idea of "Indian-ness" is itself a dubious stereotype and identity cannot truly be erased, a point reinforced by the fact that Lucy never succeeds in turning her hair blond. Thus, Lucy crystallizes the image of the colonized Indian maiden as a Hollywood idol, but her inability to turn herself into that icon critiques mainstream stereotypes of the figure.

Eventually, though, the entire world becomes overtaken by the image, marking the surrender of the real world to an aesthetic simulation. The narrator frequently remarks how the world around him looks as if it is from a magazine picture. As well, in a pivotal scene on the bridge, the narrator remarks that "[m]ovies are a lot better at this. In the movies, when something goes off the top of a building or off a cliff, you get to watch it fall all the way to the bottom. In real life, the skull only falls a few feet before it disappears between the girders, and all that's left is Lum standing there, his head down, his arms at his side" (271). Finally, the Hollywood image as a seductive consolation has entrenched itself in the community, as the narrator makes a poignant observation after Lum's funeral: "There are more people at the theatre than were at the funeral, but that doesn't surprise me. Dying on stage can be funny, and most people would rather laugh than cry" (280). Hence, King poses the wider concern that the notion of authentic culture (or even the real world) has become a thwarted pursuit and that this society has lost its traditional sacred values, as the Hollywood image has replaced traditional forms of consolation for loss.

The satirical condition of acknowledging the questionable existence of an authentic tradition, while simultaneously attempting to preserve one, ultimately extends to the central issues of homeland and cultural heritage. In *Truth and Bright Water* the river has become polluted with garbage— “[t]he new buffalo” (162) that is scattered across the land. The narrator describes the detritus that spills out from the pop culture industry: “As we watch, the bulldozer drags the pile into the light, and for a moment, I can see the boxes and plastic sacks and the drifts of loose debris, and then the machine stretches, effortlessly, and shoves everything over the edge of the slide” (162). To emphasize the tragedy of this situation, the only character who is able to retreat to a semblance of pre-colonial nature is Lum, when he camps by the river: “Look around. [...] This is the way it used to be. [...] You see any houses? [...] Any roads? [...] No tourists, [...] No railroads. No fences” (161). Ironically, Lum expresses his vision of civilization, stripped of any semblance of commercialization and popular culture, shortly before disappearing himself.

### **Skulls and Bones, Paintings and Palimpsests**

With the critique of the notion of the authentic and the problem of the commercialization and media simulation of Native life, the novel's main consolatory process is nonetheless to attempt to restore precisely a sense of tradition. To begin with, emphasizing human mortality, skull and bone imagery provides the underlying framework to the novel. Commenting on the sky, the narrator remarks that “[i]n the distance, clouds are on the move, thick and white. But as they clear the bridge, they begin to separate and change, and by the time they reach the church, they look like long, slender bones” (51). Furthermore, in relation to the land, the narrator comments that running on the stones is like “running on bones” (75) – and, combining the sky and land, the narrator remarks: “as far as you can see, the bridge is nothing more than a skeleton” (270). Within this skeletal framework, various bones lay scattered throughout the coulee (71), but the governing image of the novel is the skull that the boys find: it has “a long red ribbon [looped] through the eye sockets” (14), and it is “soft yellow and shiny and smaller” (14) than the narrator would have imagined. With the wisdom of an Elder, the narrator's grandmother remarks that it is “[b]ad luck to play with the dead” (170). Nonetheless, the skull involves the central motivation for the two main characters: for the narrator, “[t]he skull is the problem” (71) with all his theories about the disappearance of the mysterious figure at the coulee; for Lum, the skull increases his confusion of the mysterious figure and his lost mother.<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, the skull crystallizes the colonial relation be-

tween Indigenous and Christian traditions in an ironic symbolic complex: “Lum holds the skull up so it has a clear view of the church” (187) – ironic because the religion that promised redemption in death was part of the colonial process that displaced Native cultures and peoples.

Indeed, the skull and bone imagery relates to the broader history of Indigenous peoples: “maybe the bluff was once a burial ground. Maybe at one time we buried our dead there and then forgot about it. Maybe if you dug down a little in the grass and the clay, you’d find entire tribes scattered across the prairies. Such things probably happen all the time. A little rain, a little wind, and a skull just pops out of the ground” (73). King uses this narrative imagery to emphasize how Native communities are historically connected to the land, as past generations are buried in it. However, King also questions what happens when the people’s bones are removed from the land, and if that removal severs the generational sense of continuity and nationhood. Thus, King introduces the character of Monroe Swimmer,<sup>7</sup> whose mission is to restore past loss by returning the bones of Aboriginal people to their ancestral homelands. The mysterious skull that the boys find is actually a skull from a museum removed by Monroe: “I found them in drawers and boxes and stuck away on dusty shelves. Indian children” (265). Monroe “rescue[s] them” (265) from their categorization as anthropological artifacts, and conducts “[t]he ceremony, [...] [f]or putting the bones in the river” (266). Thus, despite Lum’s negative feelings about their home reserve and the garbage in the river, Monroe believes that the surrounding area is the original home of the Aboriginal bones; therefore, although the skull is stolen from a museum, it should have been buried in the local lands in the first place. For Monroe, the return of the bones is essential to their identity as a people and a way of consoling cultural loss during colonial assimilation and removal: “Look around you [...]. This is the centre of the universe,” says Monroe. “Where else would I bring them? Where else would they want to be?” (265). The dead cannot rest until they are properly honored by the living.

However, like the notion of the authentic discussed above, Monroe’s consolatory ceremony is problematic, as he does not repatriate the bones according to the customs of their specific communities. In fact, it is not clear if he even knows their respective lineages, and he offers no evidence that the bones belong in the local river and lands; rather, he invents his own highly generalized ceremony. Monroe steals the bones from the museum in reaction to the anthropologists’ treatment of them as scientific specimens, but then he arbitrarily scatters them like litter in a river that is already polluted with garbage and toxic waste. Thus, despite his idealistic intention, Monroe appropriates and subverts past

Aboriginal figures and traditions for his own critical and artistic purposes, and as a consequence ends up as a somewhat tangled mockery of himself. More specifically, in ethical terms of the Native artist, Monroe's actions reflect the danger of representing all the various discrete Aboriginal cultures in a single pan-Native framework of archetypes and assumptions. In this sense, though, while Monroe overzealously disregards specific reference, his artistic activities do uncover historical misconceptions in a broader sense, as they relate to the process of uncovering past loss and provide the basis for critiquing nineteenth-century Romantic colonial practices in art.

During his travels, Monroe rediscovered a historical reality that had been painted over and hidden from the public's scrutiny since the nineteenth century. Monroe is a "famous Indian artist" (137), who no longer paints – he is good at "restoration" (137). While working in museums, Monroe was solicited to restore nineteenth-century landscape paintings: "[they] were my specialty. [...] They all look alike. Craggy mountains, foreboding trees, sublime valleys with wild rivers running through them. [...] A primeval paradise. Peaceful. Quiet. Snow on the mountains. Luminous clouds in the sky. The rivers tumbling over dark rocks. Blah, blah, blah" (138). Many nineteenth-century Euro-North American artists depicted the land prior to colonization as empty, virgin, savage and voiceless. From the point of view of the colonial artists, Native presence was not originally established on the land; rather, the colonial artists represented their own communities as original and native to the land. However, Monroe "discovers" the secret that underneath the empty landscape paintings lie images of thriving Native communities:

I went around the world fixing paintings. They said my brushes were magic. [...] One day, the Smithsonian called me in to handle a particularly difficult painting. It was a painting of a lake at dawn, and everything was fine except that the paint along the shore had begun to fade, and images that weren't in the original painting were beginning to bleed through. [...] So I worked on the painting until it looked as good as new [...] But something went wrong. [...] The new paint wouldn't hold. Almost as soon as I finished, the images began to bleed through again. [...] You know what they were? [...] Indians, [...] There was an Indian village on the lake, slowly coming up through the layers of paint. Clear as day. (138)

"So, you know what I did?" asks Monroe: "I painted the village and the Indians back into the painting (142). As he has "discovered" that Aboriginal people existed prior to the original landscape paintings, so he

confronts resistance from the mainstream establishment and the museums that claim to preserve authentic history: “I don’t think they wanted their Indians restored. [...] I think they liked their Indians where they couldn’t see them” (261). Thus, with the figure of Monroe, King subverts the notion of the past as the colonial tradition has depicted it, revealing that the Aboriginal exists before and behind the “original.”

However, the ethical problem here is that if the real has been replaced by a simulation, there is further concern whether the past can ever actually be recovered. It is not simply a matter of uncovering the surface to find the real lost past beneath, as we will see with Monroe’s attempt to cover over the colonial structures.

### **The Disappearing Church and the Reappearing Bison**

Monroe’s restoration of what was hidden by nineteenth-century art compels him to return to his homeland, buy the local church, and restore the landscape to pre-colonial times, paradoxically through both simulation and dissimulation. Since the introduction of the reserve system and the Christian conversion of the people, the church went through a series of denominations, starting with the Baptists, then the Nazarenes, then the First Assembly of God, and finally, the Sacred Word Gospel, who were the last to occupy the church. However, a once powerful presence, the church has lain abandoned for years, and because of this lack of use and maintenance, it appears “beat-to-shit” (25). To compound this fading presence, the church’s vacant and derelict condition reflects the fading effectiveness of Christian practice in the community, and so it has also disappeared behind commercial growth and modernization: “with Truth being a modern town, the church has all but disappeared behind the Chinook Motel, the Farmer’s Bank, and the Continental Oil tower” (43). Ironically, the commercial prospects that were essential to colonial progress have obscured the centrality of the church in the community; in other words, while the church displaced Native traditions, modernity has eroded Christian structures and institutions.

Indeed, King mocks the idea of simply replacing the Christian structure with a Native structure, as the local residents contemplate what Monroe intends to do with the church: “Maybe he’s going to tear the damn thing down and put up a tipi” (25). Rather than tear it down, though, Monroe paints over the church so that it blends seamlessly into the landscape. In a reversal of the nineteenth-century colonial representation of the disappearing Indian, Monroe “make[s] the church disappear” (174). At first, this magical act appears to restore the land; however, the disappearance of the church through artifice ironically reproduces the false nineteenth-century representations of the empty land, but from an op-

posite perspective: "I look around, but everything is pretty much the same. It's as if the church has never existed" (251). However, although the aesthetic illusion makes it appear that "[t]he church is gone" (234), it is nonetheless still there: "I didn't lose the church, [...] I just lost track of it" (230). Humor and mockery aside, this response creates a potentially dangerous situation, as the narrator expresses: "Seeing that it is gone is one thing. Finding it now that it has disappeared is something else. [...] I hold my hand out in front of me like a blind person with a cane, just in case I find the church all of a sudden" (250). Hence, although King depicts comical scenes and satirical situations, he shows that, like his problematic repatriation of the bones, Monroe's restoration of the land belies his intention, as it entangles him in the opposite side of the colonial representations he is attempting to critique.

The confusion within Monroe's method of making the church disappear is compounded when he attempts to restore the bison to the land.<sup>8</sup> For Monroe, reversing the colonial process helps restore his sense of the authentic past and open the way to reanimate Indigenous memory and spiritual immanence, as he places bison sculptures throughout the landscape: three hundred and sixty buffalo statues, each unique, "I'm planning to do some restoration work" (49). The work is part of Monroe's overall project of preparing for the return of the real bison: "The real ones are on their way" (49). At first, for the narrator, the sculptures barely resemble buffalo: "Even up close, I can't tell what they are supposed to be. [...] It's a buffalo. Or at least, it's the outline of a buffalo. Flat iron wire bent into the shape of a buffalo" (139). However, although "[t]hese buffalo aren't really real" (144), Monroe nonetheless warns the narrator of the possibility of the statues coming to life: "Watch them in case they try to run away again" (142). To complicate matters, the real buffalo that Franklin bought for Indian Days "just disappea[r]" (113) from the corral on the reserve and reappear with the sculptures in the field by the disappeared church, and it eventually becomes ambiguous which buffalo are real and which are not: when the buffalo from the corral "stop moving and stand still, they look like rocks" (94). This fossilization is often sudden and unexpected: "The buffalo appear out of nowhere and begin moving towards the truck. [...] And then they stop and turn back into rocks" (112). Part of the confusion is that the narrator uses the same trope to describe both the real and the artificial buffalo, as he also describes the statues as "leaning into the wind like rocks in a river" (142). As a result, the real and the imaginary become interchangeable, challenging the division between appearance and reality: "When I wake up, [...] [t]he buffalo are still standing on the prairies, and for a moment, they look just like the buffalo on the reserve" (142). The consolatory promise

of this transformation is that “[i]t’s only a matter of time. [...] Each day, the herd will grow larger and larger. [...] Before we’re done, the buffalo will return” (144).

However, not everyone in the community feels optimistic about the return of the buffalo. In particular, Elvin, the narrator’s father, identifies the Indians with the buffalo – not in a Romantic sense, however, but in a negative sense: “Buffalo are stupid, [...] [t]he ones who stayed behind are stupid. [...] Just like the Indians” (112). Elvin also challenges the traditional view of history, again not in a positive way, but in a cynical way: “Those history books you get in school say that railroad sharpshooters killed off all the buffalo, but that’s not true. [...] Most of them just took off and never came back. [...] That’s the mistake we made. [...] We should have gone with them” (95). In fact, the community’s attempt to restore its past has resulted in a kind of theme park: “Franklin figured that a herd of buffalo would bring the tourists and help fill up Happy Trails” (94). In one sense, the recreation of the hunt is rooted in their history.<sup>9</sup> In another sense, the tourist attraction becomes a mockery of the past buffalo hunts, as the young Cherokee girl, Rebecca, casually points to the corral and says: “There, [...] [t]hat’s where you can shoot the buffalo” (157). The surreal situation prompts the narrator to critique his own people, along with colonialism and global tourism: “I wonder if [the buffalo] can remember the good old days when they had the place to themselves, before they had to worry about Indians running them off cliffs or Europeans shooting at them from the comfort of railroad cars or bloodthirsty tourists in tan walking shorts and expensive sandals chasing them across the prairies on motorcycles” (249). Significantly, the narrator goes beyond the colonial artists, as he envisions a return to a time not only before colonialism, but even before Aboriginal presence on the land. Thus, although King critiques the nineteenth-century assumptions, the narrator’s vision falls into the same contradictory predicament of removing Native communities from the picture. Nonetheless, King, through the figure of Monroe, underlines his apocalyptic goal: “I’m going to save the world” (139).

### **Magic and the Trick of the Aesthetic Apocalypse**

Within the process of disappearance and reappearance, King pushes the lost object to the point where the representation is no longer distinct from what it is representing – the representation actually becomes what it is representing. This transformation is the essence of “Magic,” which provides the central consolatory outlet for the elegiac themes of the novel: “If you want the herds to return, you have to understand magic. [...] Realism will only take you so far” (208). Indeed, while the colonial

representations are shown to be false, Monroe's restoration is also shown to be an aesthetic illusion, which is also a principle of magic, of course. In one sense, the end of a colonial institution is brought out in an image based on an optical illusion: "the sun breaks through again and the church explodes, white and hot, and for an instant, I can see Truth and Bright Water reflected off the walls" (45). From another sense, the transformation is represented as the crossing over of a mysterious threshold: "I find an open door hanging in the middle of the prairies. It looks really weird. A door hanging in space" (45); and further related to this threshold is the imagery of ascent towards the unknown: "you can't see [the steps], but they're there. [...] It's tricky climbing steps you can't see" (46). All of these instances of magic and illusion are related to a kind of apocalypse or uncovering of a hidden truth: whether it is the bison sculptures that the narrator uncovers when he lifts the "tarp" (139), or the images of Native communities that re-emerge in the empty landscape paintings as a palimpsest that Monroe restores, the revelation is to see what has always been there – like the narrator, to "see what I should have seen before" (263).<sup>10</sup>

Characteristic of magic, the narrator's vision of the restoration of the buffalo and the land to pre-civilization conditions appears to come true: "It's early evening before we've hammered in the last spike. [...] You can't see the church, and you can't see the bridge, and you can't see Truth or Bright Water. [...] Just like the old days. [...] I look, but I don't see much of anything. Besides the river, there is only the land and the sky" (143). Because of this apocalyptic achievement, Monroe wants the narrator to be his "minstrel": "make up songs and stories about me so no one forgets who I am" (203). However, sceptical of Monroe's air of self-gratification, the narrator questions if the magic is only an illusion of light and shadow: "I think about the church, but I don't know if this is a great deed or just a trick that you do with paint" (203). The remark is deflating, like being told the simple secret behind the mystery of a great magic trick. Indeed, the ethical problem, as discussed above, is that by making the church disappear and the Indians and the buffalo reappear, Monroe, in effect, faces the same contradictory conditions of the colonial artists who attempted to remake the New World according to their own visions. Monroe attempts to restore things to their proper order, but in the end he has subverted it, purposely. Rather than restore a specific tradition, Monroe adapts fragments and traces of various Native traditions, without regard for their historical accuracy, since he is more concerned with the salience of their immediate value for achieving his artistic goals – hence, the recourse to magic.

Nonetheless, it is through these layers of relations that Monroe pur-

sues his overall goal of bringing his community together. In the end, Monroe makes a giant bonfire and empties the church of all his belongings, giving them away to members of the community in a cathartic potlatch event. In this way, Monroe makes a consolatory gesture intended to heal the community, whether the giveaway ceremony is historically accurate or not. Thus, despite lacking a verifiably authentic tradition specific to the community, Monroe's methods may be more in tune with the more global references of contemporary societies. As well, in terms of redeeming the pervasiveness of popular media imagery in the novel, King modernizes the context of the giveaway ceremony by including an image of mechanized transcendence, as the bonfire appears like "a spaceship getting ready to explode into the sky" (256). Finally, in an equal move to return to a root sense of nature, King uses imagery of "stems," as the last image in the novel is of the flowers from Lum's funeral, recalling the narrator's struggle with loss and consolation: "They stay in the front window for a long time, and each day, my mother picks off the blossoms that have died, and carefully trims and cuts the flowers back until there is nothing left but the stems" (282). The stems are a symbol of mortality and the transience of life, but also the will to hold on to life for as long as possible.

Thus, although the narrative follows a flat plot-line on the surface, the novel turns out to be a multilayered story of disappearances and restorations, paintings and palimpsests, skulls and simulacra. In *Truth and Bright Water*, the source of Native identity is elusive and paradoxical, because it has been both intentionally and unintentionally obscured. In art, it has been painted over and replaced by another image of the original landscape. Nineteenth-century representations attempted to portray what nature was like at the time of colonization, and this is reinforced by what we find in colonial history books and literature. In the present day, this version of history has been revealed as false. However, also in the present day, many traditions that are reclaimed are inevitably influenced by modern media and globalization. Thus, although King attempts to critique the nineteenth-century colonial stereotypes from an Indigenous perspective, the artist cannot avoid recapitulating some of their assumptions and representations. To resolve this predicament King turns to principles of magic and apocalypse – while also critiquing their questionable outcomes. The loss of tradition, like the loss of life, is confusing not just because of the grief it causes, but because of the ambiguity it stages between the real and imaginary. Indeed, in the end, King questions the "real" power of art, revealing that art and apocalypse are only tricks of light and shadow, an illusion of paint and perspective, and of words. Rather, the consolation for loss and the restoration of past

traditions begin and end with the bare stems of the individual and the community.

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### Notes

1. Actually, it is not clear if the narrator's real name is Tecumseh. He is called this name only once in the entire novel (54), and that is by his aunt Cassie when she first sees him—it may be a nickname. Other than this single, ambiguous, playful reference, the narrator is essentially unnamed. Nonetheless, this reference works with the underlying historical references in the novel. See Daniel Justice for analysis of how Tecumseh and Lum also represent the Thunders in Cherokee cosmology (171).
2. Ridington points out the allusions to Geronimo: “Lum is a runner, a wounded warrior, [...] and in the end, a jumper (resonant with the American paratrooper's cry, ‘Geronimo’). Geronimo was trained to be a great runner and fearless warrior. He was a ‘war shaman’ (Opler 1941:200; Barrett 1971:32). He had a bad eye as the result of a bullet wound (Barrett 1971:101)” (289). As for Lum's relation to the narrator: “The novel pairs the narrator with his cousin, Lum, to suggest, ‘right and left handed twins from oral stories, creative figures, halves of a pair’ [Ridington quoting Hoy, e-mail 4/24/00]” (289).
3. Ridington explains: “Rebecca Neugin was a girl of three during the time of removals. In 1932, at the age of 100, she described her experience to Oklahoma historian Grant Foreman: ‘When the soldiers came to our house my father wanted to fight, but my mother told him that the soldiers would kill him if he did and we surrendered without a fight. They drove us out of our house to join other prisoners in a stockade. After they took us away my mother begged them to let her go back and get some bedding. So they let her go back

and she brought what bedding and a few cooking utensils she could carry and had to leave behind all of our other household possessions' [Perdue and Green 1995:169]. Rebecca especially regretted having to leave her pet duck behind" (304). Furthermore, all of the Cherokees who show up for Indian Days and stay in the "Happy Trails" trailer park allude to real characters from Cherokee history at the time of the Trail of Tears (see Ridington 304).

4. See Justice for the history of the Cherokee Chickamauga and Beloved Path theoretical approaches. Regarding King's *Truth and Bright Water*, Justice explains it is not a "Chickamauga text, centered deeply in the landscape and memoried presence of the People; rather, it steps lightly on the Beloved Path, where continuity *through* change is the underlying understanding of Cherokee presence" (178).
5. This harsh view of the local characters reveals a complicated level to the novel; however, it is also more related to King's critique of the human condition, as Justice explains: King has a "cautious view of humanity, and he sometimes leans more toward grim acceptance of human frailty than any real hope for its transformation" (158).
6. As Ridington explains, "Lum begins to talk baby talk to the skull, as if to console himself by acting the role of the mother he has lost. He seems as much to be letting go of his own spirit as he is releasing the spirit of this long lost child. 'Baby wants to say good-bye.' Lum holds the skull out at arm's length. He slowly opens his hand and lets the skull roll off his fingers. 'Bye-bye baby, says Lum. Bye-bye'" (257, 306).
7. Ridington explains the historical allusion of Monroe Swimmer's name: "Swimmer was a Cherokee healer, who in 1887 showed anthropologist James Mooney a book of sacred formulas written in the syllabary devised by Sequoyah in 1821. As Mooney discovered and King reiterates, Indians can own *both* orality and literacy, story and history" (292). Ridington further explains: "Swimmer's first name is Monroe. President James Monroe is a key figure in the shared American/Indian history of Cherokee removals. The two names are in tension like the names of cowboys and Indians in McMaster's 'The Cowboy/Indian Show' [Ryan 1991]. In 1817 Monroe wrote future President Andrew Jackson that 'the hunter or savage state requires a greater extent of territory to sustain it, than is compatible with the progress and just claims of civilized life, and must yield to it' [Prucha 1984:65]" (293).
8. See Ken Zontek's *Buffalo Nation* for a detailed history of American Indian efforts to restore the bison.
9. As discussed, King does not specify what First Nation he is depict-

ing, though a specific nation who practiced the hunting methods portrayed in the novel could be the Stoneys, at least in a representative sense. John Friesen explains: "One of the first European records pertaining to the Stoneys came from the pen of explorer Alexander Henry the Younger who noted in his journal that the Stoneys were great buffalo hunters and very hospitable to strangers. Unlike other Plains Indian tribes who chased the buffalo on horseback or used buffalo jumps as a means of killing the animals, the Stoneys built impoundments for trapping the bison, then chased the lumbering beasts into them and shot them at will" (152).

10. See Ridington on how the narrator's series of revelations works within the structure of overlapping and embedded contexts of stories in the novel.

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