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“Bad Stories”: A Theory of Indigenous Dispossession

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The truth about stories is that’s all we are.

Thomas King

The Truth About Stories

IN OCTOBER 2020, Verso published *The Verso Book of Feminism: Revolutionary Words from Four Millennia of Rebellion*. The first entry in this collection, edited by Jessie Kindig, is “How Her Teeth Were Pulled,” a story which describes how the trickster Coyote smashed the teeth from Indigenous women’s “cunts” (Kindig 3). This story depicts sexualized violence as welcomed by women and uses the slur “squaw” for Indigenous women (3). Although recorded as a feminist story told by the Northern Paiute (date unknown),¹ by checking the sources listed in *The Verso Book of Feminism* it becomes clear that the story’s origin is actually a collection of poetry written by settler academic and poet Jared Ramsey, with source material coming from the ethnographic work of Isabel Kelly recorded in *The Journal of American Folklore*, as told by several Paiute men in 1938. The original stories do not contain the same vulgar language used in Ramsey’s

¹ The stereotype of the “timeless Indian” is also being employed in this story.

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version and have a different tone. While it can be argued that this story is not feminist in the first place, the problematic retelling of the story by Ramsey to include a description of Indigenous women as “squaws” (Kin-dig 3) is a prime example of what Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice describes as bad storytelling. Justice defines bad storytelling as stories that

are imposed on us from outside. They belong to the colonizing populations that claim and dominate our homelands ... [T]hese stories are sometimes told with good intent. Most often they’re not. Sometimes they’re incomplete rather than wrong, partial rather than pernicious. But sometimes the stories are noxious, bad medicine, and even when told with the best of motivations, they can’t help but poison both the speaker and listener. (2)

Bad stories are a form of misinformation about Indigenous peoples which have been advanced for over five hundred years. This paper emerges in response to these types of bad stories told by settlers and is informed by the knowledge of women such as Mohawk poet and performer E. Pauline Johnson, Sto:lo scholar Lee Maracle, Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Simpson, Saulteaux-Metis scholar Janice Acoose, and many more Indigenous thinkers who emerged during the Red Power movement of the 1960s and 1970s. One such thinker is George Manuel, co-author of *The Fourth World: An Indian Reality*, who describes being asked the question “does Indians have feelings?” (Manuel and Posluns 3). After responding that “Yes, Indians have feelings” his friend tells him “You know, my wife and I often talked about this, and since you’re my friend I felt you wouldn’t be offended if I asked you. We actually feel Indians is no different from dogs, no feelings at all for kinship” (3). This interaction is an exemplar of the stereotypes of savagery and lack of humanity which have been held by Canadians about Indigenous peoples since colonization. Manuel theorizes that these stereotypes were created as a theory to justify the theft of Indigenous lands. He states:

The result of the collected work of these many minds was a series of racial and cultural myths: that we were savage and uncivilized; that we were war-like and had no respect for human life; that we are, therefore, unworthy of respect; that our lives are not European lives, and our property is not to be valued in the way that Europeans value property until it is firmly held in European hands. (56)

Laws, such as the Indian Act, that were enacted in order to both control the lives of Indigenous peoples and dispossess us of our land are firmly rooted in these myths.

In Acoose's book *Neither Indian Princesses nor Easy Squaws*, she discusses how there was politically motivated support in the early Canadian literary canon for developing a certain settler ideology (Acoose-Miswonigeesikokwe 32). The stereotypes that emerge from ideological literature, what Justice would call bad stories, are a part of the structure of settler colonialism and are an active method of unseating Indigenous peoples from these lands. Acoose traces these stereotypes about Indigenous women back to Amerigo Vespucci's *Mundus Novus*, which was published in 1503, thus making it one of the keys to enacting settler colonialism, and the ideas about Indigenous peoples spread through this text work hand-in-hand with other tools of colonialism such as the papal bulls. Examples of these are the 1493 "Romanus Pontifex" and the 1493 "Inter Caetera," which made up the Doctrine of Discovery, the spiritual, political, and legal justification for colonization. This doctrine continued to be used well into the nineteenth century as a justification for the dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their lands on Turtle Island, and the precedent this set still carries on today in the laws that continue to exist even after the Doctrine was renounced by the Vatican in March 2023. In Vespucci's *Mundus Novus* he writes that when Indigenous women "had the opportunity of copulating with Christians, urged by excessive lust, they defiled and prostituted themselves" (A-M 33). Therefore, the stereotypes which established Indigenous women as subhuman "squaws" are interconnected with the legal precedents for the dispossession of lands.

There is a racist fantasy that underlies an inherently masochistic pleasure the settler enjoys from these narratives about Indigenous women. This fantasy is nearly identical in terms of Black suffering and Indigenous suffering because settler colonialism is built on the simultaneous displacement of Indigenous bodies and the fungibility of Black bodies. As Eve Tuck and C. Ree outline in "A Glossary of Haunting," settler colonialism is a triad composed of the chattel slave, the Indigenous inhabitant, and "the inventive settler, whose memory becomes history, and whose ideology becomes reason" (642). When bell hooks writes about the devaluation of Black womanhood in *ain't i a woman*, she emphasizes how sexual exploitation was weaponized in multiple ways against Black women: "White women and men justified the sexual exploitation of enslaved black women by arguing that they were the initiators of sexual relationships with men. From such thinking emerged the stereotype of black women as sexual

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savages, and in sexist terms a sexual savage, a non-human, an animal cannot be raped” (52). Women have to suffer doubly: first, as the victim of sexual exploitation and, secondly, by being blamed as the cause of the exploitation. hooks connects this sexual exploitation back to slavery, stating, “a devaluation of black womanhood occurred as a result of the sexual exploitation of black women during slavery that has not altered in the course of hundreds of years” (53). These passages are very similar to the language Lee Maracle uses to talk about the state of Indigenous women in Canada, published only seven years after hooks’s groundbreaking work. In *I am Woman* Maracle writes, “The dictates of patriarchy demand that beneath the Native male comes the Native female. The dictates of racism are that Native men are beneath white women and Native females are not fit to be referred to as women” (17–18). Maracle and hooks are identifying the same hierarchies of colonialism, and hooks expresses it in almost identical fashion, “As far back as slavery, white people established a social hierarchy based on race and sex that ranked white men first, white women second, though sometimes equal to black men, who are ranked third, and black women last” (52–53).

The hierarchies of colonialism are not accidental and not natural. They are a part of the systemic nature of settler colonialism which is designed to displace Indigenous peoples around the world from their lands and, as *The Verso Book of Feminism* shows us, continue today. hooks has written that the “Systemic devaluation of black womanhood was not simply a direct consequence of race hatred, it was a calculated method of social control” (59–60). This is also a well-known fact for Indigenous peoples on Turtle Island. For Indigenous women, such as Lee Maracle and Leanne Simpson, it is an integral part of their critique of the settler colonial state. Simpson, in her book *As We Have Always Done* (2017) writes:

A great deal of the colonizer’s energy has gone into breaking the intimate connection of Nishnaabeg bodies (and minds and spirits) to each other and to the practices and associated knowledges that connect us to land, because this is the base of our power. This means land and bodies are commodified as capital under settler colonialism and are naturalized as objects for exploitation. This has always been extremely clear to Indigenous women and 2SQ people, and it’s why sexual and gender violence has to be theorized and analyzed as vital, not supplemental, to discussions of colonial dispossession. (41)

Therefore, the stereotypes of Indigenous peoples, and particularly women who are always equated to land, is a form of purposeful political warfare. It is no accident that these attitudes have led to the genocide of missing and murdered Indigenous women. That is the purpose behind the settler colonial project, to conquer these lands the same way Vespucci imagined conquering the Indigenous women he encountered.

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