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Original Citation

Bates, Catherine (2013) Waste-full Crossings: Thomas King's Rubbishy Border. In: Parallel Encounters: Culture and the Canada-US Border. Wilfrid Laurier University Press, Waterloo, Canada, pp. 1-25. (In Press)

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Waste-full crossings in Thomas King's *Truth and Bright Water*

Catherine Bates

Thomas King's *Truth & Bright Water* begins with an illusory image of a smooth border crossing that never takes place, anticipating the fatal, failed border crossing that constitutes the novel's tragic climax. King foregrounds the unfinished and wasted state of the only bridge "serving" the cross-border community:

> At a distance, the bridge between Truth and Bright Water looks whole and complete, a pale thin line, delicate and precise, bending over the Shield and slipping back into the land like a knife. But if you walk down the coulees and stand in the shadows of the deserted columns and the concrete arches, you can look up through the open planking and the rusting webs of iron mesh, and see the sky. (1)

A distanced, ordering gaze creates the misleading, deceptively *coherent* perspective, and perceives the bridge as complete. This gaze sees a version of the scene not dissimilar to the nineteenth-century landscape paintings which "big-time Indian artist" (24) Monroe Swimmer later critiques. Swimmer tells Tecumseh, the novel's narrator and Swimmer's new employee and protégé: "They are all 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" (129). These paintings present an idealized, ideologically suspect, imperial and *tidy* package of the landscape that is unpeopled; they do not depict any of the people indigenous to the land. This distorting, ordering gaze facilitates what Judith Butler calls a "regime of regulatory production" (17); as she argues, "the symbolic is a register of regulatory ideality" (18). The paintings and the misleading idea of a completed bridge both contribute to a reality constructed "according to rigid and generally falsifying borders and boundaries" (Sugars

179). The regulatory regime that provides this order involves a particularly forceful, damaging form of imagining which legitimizes particular identities and rejects others, at the same time as it sees what it wants to see and ignores the waste.

The Canada-US border as an imposed political boundary is significantly involved in this symbolic and physical control over bodies. King shows the border, what he calls "this line of someone else's imagination" (qtd. in Rooke 72), to be a place of exposure where people are defined, judged and policed by restricted state-defined notions of culture, nation and race. For him it becomes both an arbitrary line borne of the imperial imagination and a permanent sign of the continuing violence of colonisation since it does not acknowledge the different spatial boundaries of cross-border tribal communities who live on either side. However, while King focuses on the border as a material place which, when policed, holds the Native peoples who cross it accountable to the nation-state, he also figures it as a place which *makes visible* the way lives and bodies are inscribed and constrained by the nation-state.

It is not only the political boundary, but also the material presence of the river with the unfinished bridge, that obstructs the people of Truth and Bright Water. King's narrator emphasizes the falsification produced by the original perspective which envisages a smooth border crossing, then changes perspective, moves through the landscape, looks up from under the bridge and finds it to be rusting and full of holes: it is wasting away, does not function safely, was never finished, and does not satisfactorily cross the border. In other words, the narrator asks us to look up and shows us that something is wrong. But this wasting away, while signifying neglect, also provides permeability, a way to see the sky. It is this precarious possibility that the rusting webs of iron mesh offer up—to experience the wasting while recognizing what it allows us to see—which provides us the potentially productive messiness of King's border confusions. These ask us both to see and to hope for the *beyond* of falsifying

bordered perspectives and the waste they create. In other words, the bridge does cross the border, but in its dilapidated state it shows us there is something wrong; and if treated as a monument to and metonymic symbol of the border, it signifies both an irrevocable *problem* with the border and a potential re-imagining of it.

This re-imagining involves a connection between the bridge, with its unfinished wasted gaps, and the river that both is and is beyond the political border. As Tecumseh's mother notes, the river has "been here since the beginning of time" (52). Despite this sense that it is beyond human construction, the river also has a strong connection with waste: figured as both boundary and bin it is continually clogged with rubbish thrown in by passersby, and seeping in from the landfill on the reserve. Further, both river and bridge must be connected to the paintings that problematize imperial ideology in Monroe Swimmer's hands when "Indians" begin "bleeding" through (130). These collective seepings continually infiltrate King's novel: they serve as both a persistent and multivarious reminder of the problems still facing Native communities, and as a way to emphasize the troubling temptation to see only coherence, to paint over the cracks, and to hide the waste. King shows colonialism to remain an open wound which needs addressing, providing two symbols which work to disrupt the narrative in ways which impel an alternative reading of Native communities and waste. Firstly, the skull found in the river among the other waste functions as a disturbing disruption between body and waste, past and present. Moreover, importantly, as I will show, it refuses teleological explanation, necessitating alternative interpretative work. Secondly, the quilt Tecumseh's mother is making throughout the novel, which remains in process while also keeping a number of the characters warm, works as an alternative to the colonial painting. Rather than presenting a falsified perspective that necessarily seeps, it is covered in unexpected, potentially problematic objects, some of which could cause danger, such as razor blades, fish hooks and porcupine quills. But these objects are, on the surface, clearly visible,

suggesting a need to pay attention to the problems Native communities face, rather than attempt to ignore the persistent seeping. The dialogue presented by skull and quilt, engaged in by Tecumseh and potentially by the reader, exposes the seeping, but also raises the possibility for a more intimate, messy and participatory relationship with wasted objects, people, communities.

King draws attention to the border by filling it with waste. While Lum, Tecumseh and Soldier find waste in the river, Elvin smuggles toxic waste across the border and human sewage bubbles up on the reserve. A consideration of the implications of the connection King makes so insistently between waste and the border enables a symbiotic interrogation of both. Waste is the product of a system, the material that needs to be discarded to make the system work, but for the system to be working, waste should be out of sight. Within the symbolic order King establishes, the border *is* the system. By clogging the border, the waste in King's novel remains a permanent reminder of the consequences of systematizing culture and identity restrictively. Drawing upon Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger*, Jonathan Culler affiliates rubbish with dirt, arguing that "dirt is vital evidence for the total structure of thought in a culture because it is an omnibus category for everything that is out of place. To investigate what counts as dirt [and rubbish] helps to identify the categories of the system" (5). King uses his focus on the rubbish-filled border to expose the systems and inscribed boundaries that surround Native peoples' communities and bodies with rubbish, and that figure them *as* waste. But, he also suggests possible ways we can read, reconstruct and re-story the waste productively, by affectively re-imagining the border beyond violent and systematizing logic.

“Indian” as consumer product

King’s work has often been preoccupied with the way “Indianness” is packaged; his characters often have to choose whether to try work within this system, and play up to a pre-conceived notion of the “American Indian,” or to try to expose the problems with this predetermined thinking. In *Truth and Bright Water*, Elvin—Tecumseh’s father—clarifies the border’s complicity with this packaging. When crossing the border with Tecumseh, Elvin puts on a routine for the border guards: he “shakes his head and smiles and talks like the Indians you see in the westerns on the television,” afterwards telling Tecumseh, “They love that dumb Indian routine” (86). This movie version of “Indianness” allows them a smooth crossing, but perpetuates a limited, cartoon version of Native identity, one which works as an artefact—valued for its fixed state. Moreover, Elvin makes his living partly by crafting souvenirs designed to appeal to this reified “artefact” and consumer-infused notion of Indianness. Thus, it is inevitable that his little model coyotes get consigned to the rubbish bin by Skee, one of Truth’s white inhabitants who makes money from the “Natives” in his cafe. Elvin tells his son, “Everybody’s going crazy over traditional Indian stuff. I figure I can sell these for fifty bucks as fast as I can make them” (32). To authenticate the coyotes, Elvin plans not only to sign them but also to include his treaty number on an explanatory card “so there’s no question” (32). This reminds the reader of a further way indigenous peoples are ordered according to external notions of value: the state puts a price on the treaty number which is understood to authenticate the indigenous person, and by extension, their art.[1] By this logic, Elvin’s art is authentic; his inclusion of the treaty number demonstrates more clearly the problems with this form of valuing, more than Elvin’s opportunism in making money from a state compartmentalizing of identities. Paradoxically, by turning them into consumable objects, Elvin over-invests the coyotes with meaning to sell them to people who, if investing in this logic, reduce culture to the limited meaning of constructed “authentic”

artefacts. Skee himself demonstrates this first by inscribing *over* the cultural significance of the coyote to Tecumseh, ignoring the latter's protest that "[c]oyotes are sort of traditional" (35) and then by pushing the forgotten coyotes into the garbage with the left-over food. Again, it is not surprising that when tourists are around, on the reserve—the other side of the border—Elvin's business plan works. The coyotes sell like hotcakes in Bright Water during the Indian Days festival to the German tourists who seem to be trying to become a commercial version of "Indian" by buying as many objects as possible. This festival presents a kind of marketable veneer of "Indianness" which appeals to the tourists who try to access this through consumption. However, just as Swimmer describes the Indians "seeping" through the nineteenth century landscape paintings, the waste seeps through the edges of the festival signifying the inadequate performance.

We are told there is a lingering smell of sewage in Bright Water from the time the tribal community tried to run a holiday camp only to find the drainage system did not work. Further, Elvin makes money taking dangerous hospital waste across the border on his way to help with the festival. Tecumseh points out the likelihood of this waste containing bodies to Elvin (82), a fear which is almost confirmed later when Soldier the dog pulls a used hospital pad covered in junk out of the river, initially mistaken by Tecumseh as the body of the mystery woman. This incident presents us with a particularly bodily piece of waste, anticipating Lum's death. As Elvin points out when telling Tecumseh why the waste cannot be taken to the big dump in Prairie View, "They don't mind making the mess, but they don't want the job of cleaning it up" (141). Another way to think of this would be to say "they want to still keep producing the rubbish and still keep forgetting its danger." The border becomes a reminder of this disposable culture as well as this effort from the state to deliberately "forget": dangerous waste is taken over to "disappear" in Canada and indigenous identity is homogenized and made marketable to ensure a smooth crossing, and make a material living.

But with Soldier's continual excavation of the border-river, the novel will not let its readers forget the mess, and the consequences for the indigenous communities of a system dependent upon notions of inevitable obsolescence.

The skull: messing up the story

The presence of the skull does not allow us to forget the danger of the wasting process. It is the first object in the novel to jolt the reader and Tecumseh out of any comfortable reading of waste and of the border. King has argued "We talk about our environmental ethic ... Sure, we don't like oil on our beaches ... but we do nothing to prevent such stories from happening again, because the stories we tell are about how they'll never happen again. ... I think we're ethically lazy" (qtd. in Beauvais). He concludes, "If we change the stories we live by, we change our lives" (qtd. in Beauvais). This complicated process can begin by rethinking the focus of these stories. Gay Hawkins agrees, arguing that, too often, our stories about waste become infected with lament unhelpfully precluding a focus *on* the waste:

> Rather than rail against the effects of excessive consumption and a disposable culture ... or let my melancholy take over, I want to take notice of all those abandoned things. I want to think about the complexity of our relations with the material world that wasted things carry as traces on their scratched and broken surfaces. The minute you pay attention to waste a different relation with it is enacted. (*Ethics* 15)

From the beginning of *Truth & Bright Water* we are invited to pay attention to waste and the processes of wasting. After viewing the wasting bridge, we are introduced to Tecumseh and Lum, through a story which seems to be about the process of rubbishing. The teenagers *believe* they see a woman throwing garbage into the border river. Tecumseh tells us:

> A lot of junk winds up in the river this way. Some of it gets washed out of the Bright Water landfill and some of it gets blown off the prairies by the wind. But most of the garbage—car tires, glass bottles, oil drums, shopping carts—comes from people who figure that rolling an old washing machine down the side of a coulee or tossing plastic bags and roofing materials off the bank isn't going to hurt anything. (8)

The river becomes figured here as the place that is not seen (people throw stuff in so they do not have to see it any more). Tecumseh considers telling the woman to discard elsewhere. This kind of story about rubbish is very familiar: issues of "right and wrong" are clear-cut. The rubbish in the river should not be there; it is damaging to the environment; the people who put it there are unthinking and careless, and should be reprimanded. However, Tecumseh's reaction begs the question: where else could the garbage be put which would be less damaging? This garbage will hang around whether we want it to or not.[2] Moreover, we learn later that, however tempting Tecumseh's intended response was to rail at the woman, it would have been impossible and inappropriate. The story of waste being dumped changes to a less familiar narrative. The woman jumps in after the items she has thrown and when the boys looks for her, she has disappeared; all they find—with the help of Soldier the dog—is a soft, yellow, shiny, small, human skull. Lum's observation while "he holds the skull out and lets Soldier jump for it" that it "[m]akes you wonder what else she threw away," (13) haunts the novel. A story of littering with a clear moral framework becomes a mystery that Tecumseh feels compelled (but fails) to solve completely.

Arguably, the familiar readings of waste we produce are imbued with the desire for it to disappear and remain hidden. As Shanks, Platt and Rathje assert "to describe garbage, our discards, the artifacts that at some point are no longer wanted, we often use the truism 'out of sight, out of mind'. That, indeed seems to be a sincere goal, to totally eradicate our discards" (69). King, however, does not allow the waste to be "totally eradicated" or even hidden. He

asks his characters and his readers to look at it, to read it, to make something of it. The skull the boys find is a troubling object. It is found as a thrown away item and initially treated as a reusable wasted object by Soldier and Lum: Soldier uses it as a toy and Lum as a football. However, Tecumseh keeps it, making its disturbing presence continually felt throughout the novel by thinking up his own theories about the skull. As Davidson, Walton and Andrews argue each theory is based on "formulaic (primarily romance-driven) scenarios that reinforce heterosexual and racial norms" (191). The skull disrupts each theory; importantly, however, so does the way Tecumseh tests them against his own situated experience within the community. His attempts to imagine "what the woman was doing on the Horns" (63), reveals the structure of King's novel to be an important factor in his strategy to tell story differently: the ordered teleological narrative that can figure people as waste is disrupted by a persistent allowance for Tecumseh's life to surround and interrupt.

Tecumseh thinks through his first theory in the shower. He imagines the woman's husband has left her, so she throws his favourite belongings into the river out of revenge, jumping in after them, only to climb out afterwards and drive away. For Tecumseh "this theory is simple and complete" but it does not work: "there are better places to throw a suitcase into the river. And closer [and] why was she dancing?" (63). Placing the woman into a melodramatic romance-gone-bad story explains too much away. Lum disturbs Tecumseh by sticking the skull into the shower "letting it slide down the porcelain [of the bath until it] bobs around in the soap suds for a moment and then settles to the bottom of the tub" (64). Tecumseh observes "The skull looks funny sitting there, half-submerged, the soap slick floating in and out of the eye sockets" (64). The skull and Lum have impinged upon Tecumseh's theorizing, punctuating his abstract thinking. Lum has made the skull a "thing," but a thing with eyes, its material presence as object-once-alive seems to confound the explanation. [3]

Tecumseh then theorizes that the woman could be mourning, throwing herself in the river with her late husband's belongings "as a gesture of love" (64) before driving away. To test this romantic cliché, Tecumseh compares it to his own experience: "When my father left Bright Water and moved to Truth, my mother didn't yell and throw things the way you see women do in the movies. She stayed in the house and worked on the quilt. I was pretty sure she was angry, but maybe she was sad at the same time" (65). Here his life has helped interpret the skull, while the skull mystery has enabled Tecumseh to revisit an important part of his family's history and understand it to be not easily interpretable. When Tecumseh comes out of the shower to find Lum "wrapped up in [his] mother's quilt," (65) the quilt at this point seems to symbolize Tecumseh's parents' separation and his mother's anger and sadness. The quilt, here, as well as the skull, clearly functions to disrupt Tecumseh's theories.

The following passage foregrounds Lum's preoccupation with their Indianess. He uses the suggestion in the newspaper "that Indians make up the largest of Canada's prison population" to conclude that the two of them "shouldn't be wasting ... time looking for jobs" (65). Tecumseh protests, but Lum disrupts the conversation by bouncing the skull. The skull remains a focus; while they decide to hide it in the rafters Lum continues his tirade about what he understands to be their dead-end situation, concluding, "Nobody comes back to Truth and Bright Water unless they're crazy or dying" (67). Lum's desperate frustration is emphasized in this interlude; as an unemployed Indian he feels rubbished by a society in which he is statistically likely to remain impoverished or imprisoned. Tecumseh tries to counter Lum's fatalism but it is the hiding of the skull, which renders it an object pregnant with mystery lying in wait, which seems to offer a possibility beyond Lum's bleak outlook: it has the potential to tell a different story, an alternative to the one with a definite end (related to "Indian as obsolescent artefact") in which Lum feels trapped.

Tecumseh frames his third theory with doubt, making clearer that he is actually telling "likely" stories, drawing from popular culture: "The third theory is more melodramatic, and suicide sounds too much like a movie for me to like it much" (68). Here, the woman is mourning for a loved one by ceremonially jumping to her death with a suitcase of favourite possessions. This final theory is followed by Tecumseh's mother who talks to Lum of another mystery (to the novel's readers), "the accident", presumably a reference to his mother's death with which the skull becomes associated later. The narrative then returns to this troubling object: the skull – which seems to have become infused with the boys' relationships, anxieties, problems in their lives, and the secrets and mysteries which hold them together and keep them apart. We find that just as the tempting moralizing story about littering does not hold up, with the skull-as-rubbish becoming the skull-as-possibility, neither do Tecumseh's theories. As he concludes himself: "the skull is the problem ... The easiest way to manage it is to forget it altogether" (69). However, Tecumseh cannot follow this "out of sight, out of mind" logic; the skull interrupts the theories that tempt Tecumseh but also remains more significant than simply one of the many bones the two boys have a habit of finding.

The structure of King's writing encourages some connections to be made but does not allow for certain conclusions to be reached. The multiple-choice theories which come to nothing are a significant part of this structure, but so are the interruptions by Lum, the skull, and everyday living. Tecumseh is not left alone to theorize, because that is not how his life within a family and a community works. King identifies his own work as "associational literature," which he defines when discussing new ways to categorize First Nations writing. For King, associational literature connects narrative structure to narrative focus:

> Associational literature, most often, describes a Native community[,] ... concentrating ... on the daily activities and intricacies of Native life and organizing the elements of the plot along a rather flat narrative line that ignores the ubiquitous climaxes and

> resolutions that are so valued in non-Native literature. In addition to this flat narrative line, associational literature ... eschews judgements and conclusions. ("Godzilla" 13-14)

In *Truth and Bright Water*, Tecumseh's theories give the potential for "climaxes" but none come to fruition; moreover, once Tecumseh does find out where the skull came from, it does not seem the explanatory revelation he sought. Monroe Swimmer's re-burial project, of which the skull was a part, does not resolve the situation so much as perform the open wound of Native bone collection; this is highlighted by its continually unburied nature. Moreover, Lum and Soldier change the shape of Tecumseh's story and storytelling helping the reader "associate with [his] world" without becoming a part of it or being able to consume it (14). The significance of the skull, therefore, cannot be narrowed down to one essential factor; rather, the ways it disrupts otherwise neat theories reverberate throughout the novel. Just like the wasting bridge beneath which it is found, it shows there is something wrong to which we need to attend.

The quilt: refusing the smooth border crossing, re-fusing the story

The quilt Tecumseh's mother is making throughout the novel also shows there is something wrong: like the skull, it does not fit into a normative, deterministic narrative. We are told by Tecumseh that his mother's quilt is not "the easy kind of quilt you can get at the Mennonite colony near Blossom or one of the fancy machine-stitched quilts you could get in Prairie View at the Woodward's store before it went out of business" (61). In other words, it is not a recognizable artefact, as it does not follow a pre-existing pattern. Tecumseh continues, "Along with the squares and triangles and circles of cloth that have been sewn together, patterns with names like Harvest Star, and Sunshine and Shadow, and Sunburst, my mother has also fastened unexpected things to the quilt, such as the heavy metal washers that run

along the outside edges and the clusters of needles that she has worked into the stitching just below the fish hooks and the chickens' feathers" (61). Elvin interprets the quilt as having begun simply enough but becoming a problem when she began sewing on "weird things"; he decides that ultimately it constitutes the way she had of dealing with frustration and disappointment, saying somewhat dismissively, "finding all that weird stuff and wasting time sewing it on probably helps calm her down" (62). In an interview, King seems, to some extent, to substantiate this view, arguing that Tecumseh's mother is carrying on a feud with the quilt. Both point out the problem with the sharp objects, such as razor blades and porcupine needles which are sewn into the quilt. Elvin jokes that these could lead to castration, while King associates them with the mother's emotional guardedness, aligning the mother with the quilt: "you are alright, as long as you are underneath and not trying to get in" (Andrews Interview170). The quilt represents a danger, then: it contains items that could penetrate the body, the surface presenting a fraught border difficult to cross. However, tempting as it might be to try and read the quilt as a fixed symbol—a physical manifestation of the way Tecumseh's mother deals with her problems and a potential metaphor of the difficulties of border crossing—this reading does not account for the way Tecumseh and his family interact with the quilt.

As noted, firstly, it is not just that unexpected things get sewn onto the quilt, but it is also that the quilt pops up as a thing to disrupt Tecumseh's skull theorizing and to provide comfort to unexpected people. At one point, thinking they are the only ones at home, Tecumseh warns a sniffing Soldier about the fish hooks. Appearing from underneath the quilt, Auntie Cassie replies, "What fish hooks?" (120), wrapping the quilt around her, and so denying its potential physical danger. The more dangerous point of this scene, however, could be that Tecumseh's first reaction, when hearing the voice, is to say "Mom?" (120). This confusion is significant considering the mystery surrounding his mother, his aunt, and a lost

child—the quilt becomes imbricated with the possibility that Cassie could be Tecumseh's mother. But it does not resolve this issue, just as the objects on the quilt cannot be explained. The comfort and affection of the different people finding warmth from the quilt throughout the novel, despite Elvin's warnings, signifies a privileging of affect over a neatly solved mystery. King suggests that those who get underneath the quilt already occupy a place within Tecumseh's mother's affections – this reading, however, still points to the important role of the quilt as a place to reinscribe a processual and often difficult-to-express love.

A further complication is the quilt's relation to the nineteenth-century landscapes Swimmer attempts to "fix" (129). As mentioned, Swimmer recounts the focus of these paintings: sublime scenery, including trees, mountains and valleys. Tecumseh replies, "My mother has a quilt with some of that stuff on it" (129). He does not tell Swimmer about the other "unexpected things" but directly afterwards Swimmer goes on to describe the unexpected Indians who begin to bleed through the paintings—thus the novel could be said to connect the "Indians" with the objects sewn into the quilt. My reading of the dialogue between Swimmer and Tecumseh, which like many of the conversations in the novel reads like they are having two conversations and not really listening to each other, is influenced by King's remark in an interview, "[T]hat's the way conversations go a lot of times: you have two people who are talking about the same thing but you'd never know it to listen to them, but in the end it all comes out alright" (qtd. in Ridington 357). This connection between quilt and paintings both serves to recognize the Indians as rendered waste by the nineteenth-century paintings which are part of the project of disappearing them, and emphasizes the limitations of viewing the objects on the quilt as mere signifiers of frustration, rather than important material entities in themselves. They push their way into the story to remind us it is not as tidy as we might think; they might signify Tecumseh's mother's problems, which she does not articulate in any more direct way, but they also provide some comfort for Tecumseh,

who reads them differently. He concludes his introduction to the quilt thus: “What I liked best were the needles. When you held the quilt up, they would tinkle like little bells and flash in the light like knives” (62). The relationship Tecumseh develops with the quilt refuses to hold it to account as a purely homogenous and functional item that should be finished by now. Rather, it allows the stuff on the quilt somehow to speak. This moment when Tecumseh looks at the quilt resists incorporation into a narrative of instrumentality; similarly, the things get appreciated in themselves—not just as part of the quilt. His reading practice involves engaging with the “thingness of things”—rather than the systematisation of “things” within capitalist narratives of function. For Bill Brown, objects become things when they demand our attention by not working in the way they have been designed. Once we cannot use an object, we are impelled to see and perhaps feel its materiality (Brown, “Thing” 4). The function of the quilt as a cover is denaturalized by the objects which cover it. Moreover, these objects are reanimated by their surprising presence on the quilt, but even more, by Tecumseh’s multisensory engagement with them. He hears the needles, appreciates their own flashing physicality; he spends time being with the quilt. The objects that cover it become part of its constitution as a quilt that plays no straightforward instrumental role—their juxtaposition becomes a potential call for the reader to pay attention to these usually rejected “things” as matter which matters. By analogy, the connection between objects and Indians becomes a complicated call to understand that the indigenous people *matter*.

These weird things on the quilt make its role a matter of debate; while it becomes a rich signifier that something has gone wrong for Tecumseh’s mother, it also constitutes some kind of material evidence that she is paying attention to the rejected objects around her: if these are re-examined and re-contextualized, they can become part of a larger project affiliated to Monroe Swimmer’s restoration work. However, whereas Swimmer’s projects are concerned with trying to re-place and re-story—the Indians back into the picture, the buffalo

into the landscape, the skull into the burial ground—the quilt re-fuses the objects by placing them somewhere new. It is this—along with their potential to penetrate—which makes them disturbing, but also gives them the potential to change the damaging narratives which lead to Lum's tragic death.

Bodies as waste

The skull is a disturbing object; it does not allow for a neat separation between body and "thing." In fact, as I have been arguing, it signifies the danger of body-becoming-thing. As Michael Thompson notes, we make rubbish when "disregarded objects for some reason or other force their attention upon us (when we step in them perhaps)" (330). The skull in the border-river forces its attention upon Tecumseh and Lum: they step into the continuing story of the skull-as-waste-but-something-more. John Knechtel argues that "trash's malleability allows it to convert anything or anyone into garbage" (8). Moreover, in his discussions about the "order-building" of capitalist societies, Zygmunt Bauman—as if speaking to Lum's fears of becoming wasted—discusses the way "to be declared redundant means to have been disposed of because of being disposable—just like the empty and non-refundable plastic bottle or once-used syringe ... 'Redundancy' shares its semantic space with 'rejects', 'wastrels', 'garbage', 'refuse'—with *waste*" (12). Further, he discusses the settler-invasion process which rendered Native peoples in the US (and Canada) as rubbish:

> Ironically, the extermination of aborigines for the sake of clearing new sites for Europe's surplus population (that is, priming the sites for the role of dumping ground for the human waste which economic progress at home was turning out in quantities) was carried out in the name of the self-same progress that recycled the surplus of Europeans into "economic migrants". And so for instance, Theodore Roosevelt represented the extermination of American Indians as a selfless service to the cause of

> civilization: “The settler and pioneer have at bottom had justice on their side: this great continent could not have been kept as nothing but a game preserve for squalid savages.” (38)

Bauman clearly articulates the way the ordering logic of colonialism rendered Indigenous peoples in North America as waste, “squalid savages” taking up space.

With his emphasis on the discarded skull itself, and the focus on its history as an object, King confuses the borders usually set up between bodies and waste to reveal the continuing legacy of damaging colonial practices. The consequence of treating people as objects is that their bodies and identities become part of a narrative of functionality in which they are read *through*; this precludes attention to the “daily intricacies” which constitute meaningful lives. Here we can see the political possibilities of “thing theory”: Brown’s attempt to remove objects from purely instrumental readings reveals the problem with capitalist logic that potentially precludes the stories of materiality and affect that engage Tecumseh.[4] The status of the skull-as-wasted-object is made clear through the way *Truth and Bright Water* reminds readers of the attempted museumification of Indigenous cultures by Canadian and US governments. We find out that the skull was a Native Canadian child’s, one of many dug up and removed from burial sites by anthropologists who presented them as collections to museums in Canada, the US and beyond. It is one of many Monroe Swimmer found and “de-collected” (see Bruce 198) from museums, to re-bury respectfully. By figuring the skull as waste at the beginning of the novel, King highlights the inevitable consequences of colonial collecting of bone for the purposes of museum display and scientific analysis. As Daniel Francis notes about Canada, just as “the government was trying to stamp out vestiges of traditional aboriginal culture in everyday life, it was creating a new institution [the ethnological museum] devoted to the preservation of the culture” (21). The museum allows the culture to be read in a contained, consumable form. Part of this practice involved digging

up the bones of First Nations children to keep as artefacts, and so create "a museological construction of Natives as on the brink of extinction" (21) allowing their bodies to be studied within a controlled context outside of their own, with no personal interaction or acknowledgement of the living culture necessary.[5]

While working as an artist "restoring" paintings, Monroe Swimmer gains access to many museums, making it his mission to retrieve as many skulls (which he finds gathering dust in drawers in the back of museums) as possible. These skulls recall Theodor Adorno's anxieties about the decontextualization of objects in museums, which become *museal*, "a German word [which] describes objects to which the observer no longer has a vital relationship and which are in the process of dying" (173). While Adorno figures the museum as a place where objects go to die (so, advocating that we understand objects to have life), Tecumseh and Lum's engagement with the skull keeps it within a kind of living, changing narrative. In this way, it becomes related to the quilt: both disrupt the consumerist logic in which the treaty-stamped coyotes are designed to fit. They are both commensurate with Hawkins' anaylsis of Bill Keaggy's photo collection *50 Sad Chairs*. She writes, "[T]hese aren't obedient chairs clustered around a dining-room table.... Some have been dumped with other garbage or abandoned in the street" and each one is accompanied by a comment from Keaggy which highlights both our moral attitude to trash … and the subjectivity of the chair" ("Sad" 54). For Hawkins, the collection "animates things by putting them in new relations and classifications"; she observes, "By calling this collection of chairs 'sad,' he invites us to feel something for trash. He makes wasted things visible" ("Sad" 54). Similarly, the skull and quilt re-fuse waste: showing it not to be signifier of the past so much as a living entity with a present and a future. This idea is useful when considering those whose culture was effectively made waste within a colonial system that only figured them *as* the past. Indeed, it is important to note King's assertion that associational literature "reinforces the notion that, in

addition to the usable past that the concurrence of oral literature and traditional history provide us with, we also have an active present marked by cultural tenacity and a viable future" ("Godzilla" 14). Swimmer takes the skull, which has been decontextualized and become part of a process of reifying the past, and infuses it with present hopes and concerns to try and pave the way for a positive, viable future for the community. His project intends to re-figure the skulls as part of a living culture, rather than use them to act as the mementos of a dying one. The skull, found in the margins of the museum, and then in the border, ultimately sits on the border between wasted artefact and body. Just as the skull stops Tecumseh's stories from working, it interrupts and exposes the imperial project which attempts to render Native peoples as artefacts and then, inevitably, as obsolete objects, and it reminds us of our body's relationship to waste by showing us that it can *become* waste.

Swimmer restores, the quilt re-stories

While I have attempted to make comparisons between skull and quilt and glean hope from both, it is important to note that they function differently. A closer examination of the relationship they have with Swimmer's ever growing "restoration" work helps here. Arguably, Swimmer's art project tries to challenge the attempted removal and marginalisation of indigenous culture by trying to restore or re-do what has been taken away, or remove the symbolic presence of the imperial forces responsible for removal. As such, he paints the "Indians" back into the nineteenth-century landscapes which attempt to un-represent them; he tries (repeatedly) to re-bury the skull; he installs signs to "Teac[h] the Grass about Green" (43) and "Sky about Blue" (45); he replaces the buffalo with iron versions; and he tries to paint away the church. Arguably, however, this project does not work. The installed signs serve to trip Tecumseh up more than restore the colours of grass and sky; and, the church never fully disappears (it can still be found at the end of the novel).

Similarly, Swimmer laughs at the border at the same time as he reinscribes its importance by using it as a staging ground for his buffalo ceremony: "'There's Canada,' he says. Then he turns and spreads his arms. 'And this is the United States.' He spins around in a full circle, stumbles, and goes down in a heap. 'Ridiculous, isn't it?'" (132).[6]

Swimmer, then, tries to reinstall the past through the imaginative potential of art: he wants to convince Tecumseh that the buffalo move; the church is invisible. However, Tecumseh, our worried narrator, presents the possibility that what is needed is not a restoration project, but a continual process of "re-storying." The skull, despite Tecumseh's theorizing, ultimately becomes, in Lum's hands, and like Lum's body, remains fixed within damaging stories of the past. It will not be restored to the ground: first it is retrieved by Soldier found among all the other waste, next Lum overidentifies with it as it comes to signify Lum's grief for his mother and his untenable position as an uncared for, wasted child: the border between skull and Lum blurs. The quilt, however, re-stories the rejected objects, keeping them sewn on, secure, whilst ensuring they serve as a dangerous reminder of the multivarious difficulties facing Tecumseh's community. In this way it relates to the new meaning objects gain in Swimmer's giveaway: these become re-storied through the process of being passed on to be valued by a new person. They represent the continuing potential for objects to mean differently, rather than be delimited by the logic of planned obsolescence.

Indeed, it is clear that by attempting to become a successful runner, Lum was trying to put his own body within an alternative interpretative framework: to mean differently. His father's fists—which become metonyms for the material damage the continual displacement Native peoples have experienced——stop him from running into a life with more potential; he finishes his story by running onto the wasting bordered bridge with the skull and exposing the larger processes of wasting: the bridge becomes complicit in Lum's death, a death which results in Lum's body becoming junk to be fished out of the river. This death becomes a kind

of failed border crossing, as if to expose the problems with the bordered logic that asks bodies to be accountable at the same time as failing to account for the lived reality *of* these bodies. The re-storied skull remains unburied, presumably to be retrieved from the river, again, as a reminder of the "Indian-as-artefact" mentality that haunts Tecumseh's community, and by analogy the existence of North American indigenous peoples more widely. The quilt, however, refuses to remain an artefact; it remains in process, and displays its difficulties. It does not allow for the idea of the illusory smooth border crossing the distanced view of the bridge suggests. Roland Barthes reminds us that "smoothness is always an attribute of perfection because its opposite reveals a technical and typically human operation of assembling" (88).[7] Within the imperfection of the quilt with its constituent weird things, as opposed to the uncanny clean and shininess of the museumified skull, lies the possibility for indigenous culture to become and mean differently. King's much-cited thoughts on the border could suggest a way a different relationship between border and body can be developed:

> Well, I guess I'm supposed to say that I believe in the line that exists between the US and Canada, but for me it's an imaginary line. It's a line from somebody else's imagination; it's not my imagination. It divides people like the Mohawk into the Canadian Mohawks and US Mohawks. They're the same people. It divides the Blackfoot who live in Browning from the Blackfoot who live at Standoff, for example. So the line is a political line, that border line...that kind of border and that kind of nationalism creates centres that I don't think do Indian people any good. It suggests things to us that we should become, things I'm not much interested in becoming. (Rooke Interview 72)

In identifying this difficulty—that the border signifies the dominance of one cultural imagination over another—King offers his strategy for dealing with this imposition: to

identify the line *as* imaginary and to refuse to *become* the identity it asks him to be. By giving away the quilt to us, by impelling us to participate in its making through interpreting its unexpectedness, he potentially allows it to *become* differently: a different relation to both waste and the border starts to seem possible. The quilt signifies not a process of restoring so much as re-storying; the novel moves on from King's refusal, to invite us to become part of a re-fusing.

Notes

Acknowledgement: This paper has developed from invaluable and continuing discussion about this ever-giving novel with Gillian Roberts and David Stirrup, and about waste with Susan Anderson, James Ward and Milena Marinkova.

[1] As David Stirrup notes this also serves to comment on the Indian Arts and Crafts Act (1990), which prohibits art made by non-federally recognised Indians from being sold as Indian art.

[2] While Gay Hawkins points out 'the material recalcitrance of trash, its lingering presence, its refusal to go away' ("Sad" 50), Mary Douglas tells us that "[w]henever a strict pattern of purity is imposed on our lives it is either highly uncomfortable or it leads into contradiction if closely followed, or it leads to hypocrisy. That which is negated is not thereby removed" (163). James Ward draws upon this idea that rubbish hangs around despite efforts to get rid of it with great effect, ultimately arguing that "[w]hat rubbish theory teaches us, however, is that fragmented, destabilized, decentred things—including selves, myths, and export industries—do not go away; they may seem invisible but they are durable" (91).
[3] This recalls Merleau-Ponty's notion of the body as a "thing among things," further explored by Bill Brown ("Thing").
[4] Brown's two more recent articles on things, about the artefacts of slavery (2006) and the way in which First Nations artist Robert Davidson recontextualizes iconic objects of late capitalist culture (2010) clearly illustrates the political import of his thing theorizing.
[5] The bones in this context show these museums and archives to be performative, not so much describing a culture as producing a version of which solidifies a certain power relation: the curator defines the dying culture. Richards and Spivak have written usefully about the role of the archive to uphold the imperial machine. For Richards, the imperial archive becomes "a fantasy of knowledge collected and united in the service of state and Empire" (6). Meanwhile, in her examination of India's colonial archive, Spivak notes how the distinction between imperial literature and imperial archives becomes blurred as each feeds off the other (198).
[6] Thanks to David Stirrup for his emphasis, in our continual conversations about the novel, upon the failure of Swimmer's art project (see Stirrup).
[7] Thanks to Olivia Rawes for reminding me of this helpful observation.

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