
Sordid Pasts, Indigenous Futures: Necropolitics and Survivance in Louis Owens' *Bone Game*

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In *Mixedblood Messages: Literature, Film, Family, Place*, Louis Owens (Choctaw/Cherokee/Irish) describes California as “a place where [he] never stopped being a stranger” (233). A sense of belonging, not just for Owens but for many of his Native protagonists, appears to be as illusory as the Hollywood narratives (like the 1992 production of *Last of the Mohicans* referenced by the narrator) that many of his characters ridicule and rebel against. California embodies the United States’ settler colonialist genocide as much as its steadfast refusal to truly reconcile with its history.¹ In its capacity to estrange, as well as to seduce with promises of new beginnings, the state provides more than a setting for Owens’ 1994 *Bone Game*. The state’s “ritualistic violence” toward its Indigenous communities, as well as the pat version of reconciliation that it promotes via its Hollywood productions and history textbooks, influence the novel’s main narrative as much as any of the characters (Purdy 9).

Bone Game recounts the difficulties of reconciliation in the political climate of the late-twentieth century, when this type of work perhaps seemed largely performative or, worse yet, intended only for individual gain. According to our third-person narrator, the idealism and fervor of 1960s social activism, embodied most relevantly in the context of the novel by the American Indian Movement (AIM), is gone. AIM activists have become performers pursuing profit and fame, “running sweat ceremonies for crystal gazers in

Santa Cruz, playing Chingachgook in a Hollywood movie, and singing with an Indian rap group" (31-2). While a stiff assessment of Russell Means and John Trudell, this passage depicts the 1990s as a time when the arduous work of reconciliation perhaps seemed abandoned. Rather than creating new narratives about Indigenous sovereignty, for instance, activists like Means seemed content with playing a supporting role in a narrative that serves as an early example of the Vanishing Indian myth. *Bone Game*, then, is set in a time informed just as much by settler colonialism as by the neoliberal milieu of the 1970s and 1980s, when personal profit largely eclipsed communal responsibility.

Cole McCurtain, our protagonist, has no community at the beginning of the novel. In his off-campus home, bottles of liquor pile up alongside unopened mail. Social interactions occur only in his capacity as an English professor teaching classes on Modernism and Native American literature. In addition to Cole's trauma from the death of his brother, Attis—the subject of Owens' *The Sharpest Sight* (1992)—he is troubled by dreams of a figure painted half-white and half-black "ready to gamble for this world" (71). These dreams unsettle Cole from his sleep, from his alcoholism, and root him in the genocidal history of Santa Cruz, where the Franciscan mission system recorded some of the state's highest death rates (Bernardin 47). Only knowing "a little bit" of the story and his role in it, Cole is joined by his college-aged daughter, Abby, as well as his father Hoey, his Uncle Luther, and his honorary "grandmother," Onatima, who advises Cole and others about the importance of stories (79). Together with Alex, a Diné Anthropology professor working at the same university, this group must reconcile the horrors of settler colonialism before it victimizes them. At the same time, each of them must help construct an Indigenous future when the realities of history are addressed, Indigenous sovereignty is restored, community and communal responsibility are revitalized, and Indigenous stories are linked and propagated.

Survivance stories, which Gerald Vizenor (Anishinaabe) defines as “renunciations of dominance, detractions, obtrusions, the unbearable sentiments of tragedy, and the legacy of victimry,” connect Indigenous peoples to their ancestors, their histories, as well as to their descendants (1). The title of this essay, “Sordid Pasts, Indigenous Futures” speaks to this intergenerational connection forged out of survivance. While seemingly implying distinctions based on chronology (the past, simply put, is not the future, and vice versa), my objective is to diminish such chronological distinctions to show how Owens’ novel both prevents the past from appearing beyond reproach and stops the future from seeming too abstract. The novel asserts that Indigenous futures can be realized and fulfilled when the horrors of settler colonialism are addressed and resolved.

In the context of this study, an Indigenous future is one that honors Indigenous claims of sovereignty—of territory, of bodies, and of thought. While geared toward the future, as the name suggests, it is linked to the pasts informing our shared (or, in the very least, concurrent) present. Furthermore, an Indigenous future is rooted in the agency of and the voice(s) from Native communities; thus, it is closely related to Leanne Betasamosake Simpson’s (Mississauga Nishnaabeg) concept of “Indigenous freedom,” which begins with “being very clear about what [we] want out of the present and what [we] expect from the future” (7). Cole’s and his community’s objective is two-fold: to tend to the past and the future simultaneously. By alleviating the injustices of the former, they brighten the prospects of the latter for Indigenous people, whose genocide has long been neglected in popular discourses about California and the United States more generally.

As Owens makes clear with *Bone Game*, the past informs both the present and possibilities for the future. The past of California, moreover, is rooted in necropolitics or, as Achille Mbembe explains, “the power of death” (39). Necropolitical power has been

implemented against the Indigenous people of California throughout the region's history: from its missionary settlements as northern Mexico, to the gold rush of the mid-1800s, to the California of the novel in which Cole, his daughter Abby, and his friend/colleague Alex are the targets of a serial killer. Indigenous people are exposed to "the power of death" to such a degree that it informs their individual and collective senses of self. Onatima explains to Cole,

"It's not wrong to survive. I see Indians all the time who are ashamed of surviving, and they don't even know it. We have survived a five-hundred-year war in which millions of us were starved to death, burned in our homes, shot and killed with disease and alcohol. It's a miracle any Indian is alive today. Why us, we wonder. We read their books and find out we're supposed to die. That's the story they've made up for us." (165)

Settler colonialist stories teach Natives that there is something innately wrong about their ongoing survival. The danger of this lesson is compounded by the fact that these "books," and the world they have helped develop, seem to go largely unchallenged. Onatima tells Cole when he is younger: "[Writing] is how they make the world" (20). But it is, to return to Mbembe, a "*death-world*" that these books create, one "in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*" (Mbembe 40, italics in original). While Mbembe writes in the context of the occupation of Palestine (also a settler colonialist state), his concept of necropolitics aligns just as well with California, where Indigenous people, "and by extension all who can be made 'Indian,'... can be killed without being murdered" (Byrd 227). Their deaths yield no justice, not even sufficient social outrage. There is no justice for the Ohlone, who suffered the whip from Spanish missionaries in the not-so-distant past that haunts Cole.

Owens himself had a complex relationship with his adopted state. While recognizing the “boundless possibility” that California promises in the minds of many, including Cole and Abby, Owens was also haunted by the heavy toll that the gold rush of the mid-1800s had on the state’s Indigenous communities, as evidenced by their 100,000 casualties (“Where Things Can Happen” 152). Underwriting the state’s promise of riches (historically via the gold rush or, more recently, via Hollywood or the tech-boom beginning in the late-twentieth century) are the atrocities enacted by Spanish and American settlers against California Natives that continue to go unacknowledged in the context of *Bone Game*. As Onatima observes about the part of California outside of Cole’s Santa Cruz home, “I’ve never felt a place so troubled by the past. And that, of course, is the essence of our problem... we know in our hearts that there is no such thing as the past... To believe otherwise is to deceive ourselves and to never be whole” (176). Here, Onatima is pushing back against the dominant narrative that the past is simply past and that dwelling on it is counterproductive. The failure to acknowledge and reconcile the injustices of history, she states, prevents Indigenous people of the Americas from “be[coming] whole,” much in the same way that a serial killer terrorizing Santa Cruz deliberately dismembers his victims. This history includes the oft-neglected enslavement of Indigenous people until 1867, a fact that prompts Cole to comment, “Californians don’t like to hear about their sordid pasts. No one’s supposed to even have a past in California. It’s considered in poor taste” (178). This conception of California as a place without a past no doubt contributes to its utopic associations. But rather than being a sign of utopia, the state’s deliberate refusal of its past is more dystopic in nature. Raffaella Baccolini argues that a dystopia, like California in *Bone Game*, in fact “depends on and denies history.” California denies its history of slavery and genocide, while “depend[ing] on” it to naturalize the presence and power of Euro-American settlers,

even as many Native communities, including the Ohlone of the Santa Cruz region, struggle for recognition from the United States federal government (115).²

Rather than reversing this dystopian tendency to ignore history, the university where Cole works contributes to the milieu obfuscating uncomfortable histories of the state. Built on Ohlone burial grounds, as Alex points out, the university seems uninterested in serving the state's Indigenous communities when it is easier—and, perhaps more importantly, more profitable—for it to control the public narrative of their histories. Alex quips, "They don't want an Indian in their [Anthropology] department unless he's in a museum, like Ishi. It makes them uncomfortable to have a live Indian around when they want to go dig up Chumash bones" (51). Acting under the financial and ideological directive of UC Santa Cruz, the department only wants Natives as objects of study, like the dried up bones of the Chumash or the passivity that academic institutions wish to impose on someone like Ishi. Alex, however, wishes to be an active agent of social and intellectual change: he aims to prove himself as an inquiring subject, not just as a subject of inquiry. He contests the pacification of the Native by proposing a project in which he will treat Puritan bones as the bones of Native peoples have often been treated:

"They have the remains of twelve thousand Native people in the Hearst Museum³ at Berkeley, right? The bones of our relations. Well, I've written an NSF proposal for a team of Indian anthropologists to do a dig in the cemetery at the Old North Church in Boston. That's where they buried all those Puritans. The Winthrops are buried there. My basic argument is that it's imperative we Indians learn more about Puritan culture. Puritans had a significant impact on us." (180)

Describing Puritans as "primitive but fascinating people," Alex takes the language often deployed against Indigenous people and turns it against settlers (180). Furthermore, he

portrays Puritans in the same objective manner typically reserved for Natives, arguing that “it’s imperative we Indians learn more about Puritan culture [because they have] had a significant impact on us” (180). Puritans are examined for their “impact” without having any say in the process or in any conclusions Alex may draw. They are also spoken of in the past tense (“had”) as if they exist exclusively in history, a treatment predominantly reserved for Natives. In this way, Alex shows his status as the narrative’s primary trickster figure by emphasizing “humor over tragedy” (Lalonde 19). Alex does not dwell on the tragic aspects of Native experiences; rather, he uses humor and wit to challenge dominant narrative of American academia that reduces Natives to passive objects only. As Vine Deloria Jr. (Standing Rock Sioux) writes in *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto*, “Laughter encompasses the limits of the soul. In humor life is redefined and accepted” (146). Alex’s humor, then, is an example of survivance, in that it “is an active presence over absence” (Vizenor 1). His use of humor in this passage highlights his “presence” in an intellectual space where his “absence” would perhaps be more welcome. Alex also highlights the necropolitical dystopia that *Bone Game* both accentuates and critiques, because Native Americans are only featured in museums as displays, not as scholars or curators. In his NSF proposal, then, he brings to mind the tragic case of Ishi, who as Vizenor explains, “represents to many readers the cultural absence and tragic victimry of Native American Indians in California” (3). Commodified as the “last wild Indian,” Ishi marks in the minds of many the end of the dominant story of California Natives. In contrast, individuals like Alex and Cole complicate settler notions that the west was “won,” that the frontier has ended, and that settler guilt over the horrors perpetuated against Natives can be assuaged if settlers (and their descendants) simply feel bad enough about them.

Guilt spares Euro-American settlers the mess of having to acknowledge the necropolitical processes in which Indigenous people are implicated by the state. Mbembe writes, "the human being truly *becomes a subject*— that is, separated from the animal — in the struggle and the work through which he or she confronts death (understood as the violence of negativity). It is through this confrontation with death that he or she is cast into the incessant movement of history" (14, italics in original). To apply this argument to Owens' *Bone Game*, we must begin by acknowledging how it omits the processes of racialization in its discussion of how the state creates its subjects. In other words, the creation of a subject is by no means uniform across the citizenry, as each subject is variously affected by history, geography, language, and religion. Second, Mbembe portrays the subject's "confrontation with death" as a voluntary act when, in fact, the nation-state laying claim (or trying to claim) the subject is the one forcing this "confrontation." Ishi, for instance, was not seeking captivity when he was captured by settlers; the last of his tribe, he was in search for food. Likewise, the Ohlone (and all other California Natives) were not seeking Christ—or, more specifically, Roman Catholicism—but rather were presented with them through the cruel methods of the Spanish missionaries. As Alex puts it to Cole, who is still struggling to figure out his role in the creation of an Indigenous future, "the Spanish came and taught [the Ohlone] history and death in a single moment... one morning they woke up and the world was unrecognizable. They must have felt like they were the dead and the Spanish were the living" (54).

This feeling of being dead extends to the present day of the novel to Cole, whose struggles to reconcile history (using literature) are compounded by his own inability to express the complexities and nuances of Black Elk in a lecture. Reflecting on it, Cole identifies where he may have failed through the third-person narrator:

In trying to free Black Elk from the romantic visions of John Neihardt and the students, he'd confused everything. He could tell the student felt cheated, missing the truth of the beautiful, troubled, old man, Nicholas Black Elk, the angry Catholic who had been born on the boundary of one world and survived far into another." (35)

Black Elk is a passive presence, even in his own narrative. Neihardt has assumed authorial control of Black Elk's life story. Following Neihardt's model, Cole's students are intent on perpetuating the silencing of Native people so that they may impose their own colonialist desires onto them: "They brought [Cole] lovely feathers, presenting them with wonder because he was Indian, as though his mixed blood allowed them access to certain astonishments of the beautiful world. In their own mirrors, they were explorers, raiding parties, horse thieves of life, and some of them were mad" (11). In these scenarios, they are not a passive audience for Cole's lecture; they are active participants in narratives of their own imagining: narratives forged out of their own tenuous grips on history rooted more in Old West films and grade-school textbooks that provide the one-sided version of American history that gives them comfort.⁴

Cole recognizes that his students do not actually want to confront the horrors of settler colonialism as they appear in Black Elk's narrative. Frustrated, he asks his teaching assistant, "[t]hat's what the fucking world wants, isn't it, Robert? To see Indians as noble and mystical, and most important of all, impotent and doomed" (42). The impotence of Natives is perhaps their most important characteristic, as it disqualifies them from being present in the nation's future. To Cole's students and his T.A., there is no need for actual Native Americans if settler whites like them can just as easily (and comfortably) fancy themselves in the same roles, as either "reincarnations of Crazy Horse [or] descendants of Indian princesses" (21). The sordidness of the past, then, is compounded by the

inability of settlers, including those that might otherwise consider themselves allies, to come to terms with history and to embrace their supporting roles in the long, ongoing process of reconciliation. The past itself is not what settlers consider sordid; as the students imaginings make clear, the past is rife with possibility. Rather, it is the act of making settlers feel guilty and helpless about the past that can be considered, as Cole jokes, "sordid" (178). Reflecting on their roles in perpetuating settler colonialist history, as well as genuinely supporting Indigenous people instead of simply speaking for (and over) them, is not nearly as romantic and appealing as being the sole hero of the story.

Survivance, after all, is linked to community. Vizenor uses the "ance" suffix to elaborate on the active nature of survivance: "the suffix *ance* is a quality of action, as in *survivance, relevance, assistance*" (19, italics in original). The last of these words, "assistance," hints at the communal nature of survivance in particular. The heroic individual glamorized by western narratives is incompatible with Indigenous notions of kinship, community, and responsibility. In *Bone Game*, this mentality geared towards individualism is embodied most by Cole's T.A., Robert, who speaks of "restor[ing] the balance" of the Earth" as if he alone can do the necessary work (103). His use of collective pronouns like "we" and "us" elsewhere in his conversation with Abby does not negate the fact that he is speaking only for himself and speaking *at* and *over* Abby during most of the conversation. For Robert, these objectives can only be accomplished by a single male individual, a hero—or, as Cole dismissively refers to Robert, a "Natty Bumppo of Santa Cruz" (206). In other words, the goal of achieving "balance" on a global level require an individual that acts under the guidance of Native Americans but who learns their ways and skills to such a masterful degree that he ultimately renders his guides/mentors obsolete. Moviegoers of the time period would have seen this same process a couple years earlier in Michael Mann's adaptation of *Last of the Mohicans*, in

which Natty Bumppo (played by Daniel Day-Lewis) integrates the skills of his Native American guides to such a degree that at the end, Chingachgook (played by Russell Means) can leave the lands to which he alone is Indigenous after the death of his son, Uncas, to Natty.

The primary method of resistance, or survivance, depicted in the novel is Cole's act of writing. Through writing, Cole undermines the narrative control of settler colonists, who as Onatima tells him "would imprison [him and other Indigenous people] in their vision and their stories" (140). In the context of *Bone Game*, this "vision" of Indigenous people relegates them to the past or, true to the necropolitical and dystopic landscape of California, to the grave. Either fate contributes to the silencing of Indigenous people and the erasure of their experiences and histories. Stories like Cole's challenge the limited narrative scope provided by settlers to the state's (and nation's) Indigenous people. As Onatima advises him, stories are a matter of survivance. She states, "We have to have our own stories" (140). It is stories that allow Owens' Native American characters—whether they are Choctaw, Chickasaw, or Diné—to recognize their roles in their ongoing construction of an Indigenous future. Stories also create a sense of community where there was none.

Cole's writing is both in service to and made possible by his community that assists him. Prior to their arrival, Cole not only stopped writing but had reached a point where its absence failed to register: "For the first time in ages, he considered the writing he hadn't done, surprised to realize that he hadn't even thought of writing since he'd moved, until that moment hadn't even felt guilty about not doing it" (194-5). The link between writing and place is significant here: the fact that his practice and dedication to writing leaves him when he arrived in California is no small detail. Before his move to Santa Cruz, he lived with Abby and his wife in "Indian country," where he felt rooted in

ways that would elude him following his move to Santa Cruz (and in ways that elude Owens himself, as mentioned at the beginning of the article). But his dreams of California's genocidal history, while unsettling and haunting, root him to Santa Cruz more than he had felt prior. As John Gamber argues, Cole's writing helps him "re-place" to Santa Cruz, meaning he "establish[es] [himself] where [he is, and is] able to re-place where [he] might go" (229). Gamber's process of "re-place[ment]" marks a radical shift in perspective for Cole. Over the course of the novel, Santa Cruz becomes *his*: his community, his home, his sense of responsibility to others. His dreams, while jarring, make community possible for Cole in Santa Cruz.

Furthermore, the dreams gift him with a sense of responsibility that teaching at the college does not provide. Now implicated in the genocide of the Ohlone in the Santa Cruz region, he finally returns to writing because he recognized it as his responsibility. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson writes, "I believe our responsibility as Indigenous people is to work alongside our Ancestors and those not yet born to continually give birth to an Indigenous present that generates Indigenous freedom, and this means creating generations that are in love with, attached, to, and committed to their land" (25). While he is not Indigenous to the lands of the Santa Cruz region, Cole takes an active role in resolving the injustices written in the region's history. Through dreams and his conversations with Onatima and Alex, Cole understands that his responsibility to write is intrinsically linked to his responsibility to work alongside the Ohlone, especially Venancio, who haunts Cole with messages of the cruelty of the Franciscan missionaries, namely Padre Andres Quintana, who Alex explains "used a whip with wire ends to shred [the Ohlone people's] backs" (52).

Cole, however, does not understand why he was chosen for such a prominent role in the settler colonialist narrative of Santa Cruz. Even while learning about the injustices

imposed on the Ohlone, Cole struggles to determine where his allegiance lies. He says to Alex,

“The strangest thing... is that I’m both of them. It’s as if I’m everything and everyone at the same time. I’m the priest whipping the Indian’s back to a bloody pulp, and I feel every second of it. And love it. I want to kill them all and spread their guts out to dry, hate them because their souls are somewhere I can’t reach... And it’s me tied to the tree and getting my back cut to shreds, feeling like somebody’s raking the flesh off my bones with steel claws and hating the priest and everything around me.” (95)

How can he reconcile the horrors of settler colonialism, of California’s necropolitical history, if he cannot reconcile his own split allegiance and self-hatred? In this passage, Cole confesses to the type of “*intense liminality*” that the narrator jokingly sees in him at the beginning of the novel (17, italics in original). Cole is not enough of any one category of identity. In the scenario he presents in this passage, he is neither the priest nor the Ohlone. He is both of them, which is to say equally neither. Likewise, he constantly feels that he is not “Indian” enough, as the text’s repeated references to his “mixedblood” lineage make clear. He is also liminal from a geographical standpoint, never belonging anywhere until the genocidal past of Santa Cruz grips him in his sleep and awakens him through the emergence of Venancio.

But unlike his students, who fantasize about role-playing as Indians and as colonists with equal aplomb (21; 11), Cole attempts to come to terms with his role in the ongoing narrative about creating an Indigenous future. His is a narrative based just as much on reflection and commiseration as it is about physical action, which is finally required at the end when Abby kills Robert when he is revealed to be the serial killer. Writing, and Native American literature in general, help Cole escape his “liminality,” a

position that he had been occupying alone, and move into a role within a community. Cole's move towards becoming an active community member is likewise enacted at the scale of the book, which deliberately engages with other canonical works of Native American literature to show the intergenerational and communal scope of survivance. Earlier works of Native American literature, for instance, help Cole make sense of the narrative in which he finds himself, even as it unfolds. Following the death of his adopted dog (provocatively named Custer), Cole teaches James Welch's (Blackfeet/A'anin) 1973 novel *Winter In the Blood*. Our narrator explains, "In the novel they'd discussed in class that morning, the Indian narrator had confessed to shooting a dog just because he was drunk and it was moving. Custer's death, however, seems part of something much bigger, part of everything that had been happening" (193). Cole struggles to find meaning in the poisoning of his dog, yet he knows there is meaning somewhere. Rather than being a violent act for the sake of acting violently (like Welch's unnamed narrator), Cole understands that each action is part of a narrative that, even as it nears its end, remains beyond his control and comprehension. As Rochelle Venuto explains, Owens' novel is ultimately about "the need for stories to help make meaning out of existence" (26). Her argument relates to Cole's own writing, certainly, but it equally connects with Owens' rhetorical use of previous works of literature to develop *Bone Game's* engagement with the nation's (and the state's) settler colonialist past, as well as its construction of an Indigenous future. Resolving settler colonialism in the creation of an Indigenous future, however, is no small process and has no neat resolution. It is complex and at times may even seem cyclical, as we see with a second example of the novel's intertextuality.

On their way through New Mexico to California, Luther and Hoey encounter Emo, the antagonist of Leslie Marmon Silko's (Laguna Pueblo) *Ceremony* (1977). Published

sixteen years before *Bone Game*, Silko's *Ceremony* ends with an uneasy resolution. Emo has been sent to California after murdering his friend, Pinkie, and the other characters observe that the witchery, rather than being settled, is simply "dead *for now*" (Silko 243, emphasis added). The resolution that Silko gives readers purposefully refrains from finality. The antagonism facing her characters and territory is not completely overcome; rather, through Emo's exile to California, it is deferred, "dead for now," only to re-emerge in the present of Owens' novel, when Luther and Hoey discover Emo back in New Mexico selling young women to men in California. Owens deploys *Ceremony* to demonstrate how the cycles of violence are quick to return and must constantly be broken: as Tayo had done when he refrained from killing Emo in *Ceremony*, Luther and Hoey consciously choose not to murder him to break free from the violence born out of the genocide, displacement, and warfare of settler colonialism. They abstain from doing the work of necropolitical ideologies that link Native Americans with violence, either as enactors or as victims. Venuto similarly argues that Luther and Hoey "refrai[n] from killing Emo and his cohorts, effectively ending the cycle of violence by refusing to participate in it" (37). In their refusal to participate in this cycle, they make possible a different progression of time, autonomous from settler notions of time. This present (and future) that they and other characters create exists concurrently with the present and future perpetuated by settlers, who relegate Natives and the injustices enacted against them to the past. Luther's and Hoey's act in this scene makes possible "the diversity of processes of becoming and the variety of potential interrelations among those processes" (Rifkin 17). Their decision, in other words, is not simply personal in scope. By keeping Emo alive and preventing him from enacting settler colonialist violence against others, Luther and Hoey enable a different "proce[ss] of becoming" in which Natives do not simply destroy one another and themselves. Characters like Luther, Hoey, and Cole

challenge stereotypes of Indigenous people as violent or as alcoholics through the course of the novel. The stereotypes that these characters overcome can in fact be linked to the Euro-American settling of California and the subsequent genocide of Indigenous people. Brendan C. Lindsey explains how trail guides and emigrant guides "played upon [settler] fears of Indian savagery already present in the Euro-American psyche" (24). Here, Luther and Hoey prevent the "savagery" of Emo's transgressions against Indigenous women and thus, in no small way, challenge the construction of the "Euro-American psyche" that expects them to take violent revenge against one of their own.

Rather than depicting it as something to be reconciled, the earliest Euro-American settlers viewed genocide as a necessary consequence of Manifest Destiny. Lindsey explains that California's first state governor, Peter H. Burnett "believed that God had ordained the end of Native peoples as part of Manifest Destiny... Indeed in the minds of some nineteenth-century Euro-Americans, to turn away from genocide would be to contravene God's plan" (231). The genocide of Natives in California, as well as the use of God to justify that genocide, predates Manifest Destiny, though. Franciscan missionaries in the early-nineteenth century used the teachings of God to justify their cruel treatment of Natives, who resisted their religious doctrine. This far-reaching history of Mexican California might seem too removed from the late-twentieth century context of *Bone Game*. However, even before the novel begins, Owens emphasizes the speciousness of Euro-American notions of chronology that make the past seem irrelevant to the present. The Epilogue presents us with two widely disparate dates:

October 15, 1812. *Government Surgeon Manuel Quijano, accompanied by six armed men, is dispatched from the presidio in Monterey with orders to exhume the body of Padre Andres Quintana at the mission of Santa Cruz, La Exaltacion de*

la Santa Cruz. The priest is found to have been murdered, tortured in pudendis, and hanged.

November 1, 1993. *The dismembered body of a young woman begins washing ashore on the beaches of Santa Cruz, California.* (3, italics in original)

While both events speak to the necropolitics of California, they are presented as being so removed from one another—chronologically as well as in scope—that the settler colonialist violence of the past (the murder of Padre Quintana in retaliation for his torture of the Ohlone) and the violence of the present day of the novel (the dismembered young woman) appear to bear no relation aside from their location of Santa Cruz. However, their juxtaposition collapses the settler notion of chronology that prevents any connections between these acts of violence in an attempt to keep the genocide of California Natives in the past and seemingly beyond resolution. As Chris Lalonde has argued, “[i]n juxtaposing events occurring around Santa Cruz, California in the nineteenth century with those occurring in the late twentieth century, the narrative helps to emphasize the text’s concern and play with time, temporality, and the idea of history” (101). The past and the present can exist concurrently, especially at the level of violence in the United States. This concurrence is not lost on Venancio who comments at the end of the novel, while staring out at Santa Cruz in the present day that “It is a world so like [my] own” (243). Histories do not automatically denote positive progress. And neither Silko’s novel’s ending nor Owens’ connote finality. To do so would imply that the horrors of history have been settled, that the characters’ work (as well as our own) is complete.

That is not the case. Even after Robert’s death, the characters feel anxiety instead of relief. Like in Silko’s novel, the antagonism that they have overcome is only temporarily settled. Onatima explains to Cole as she is about to head back home:

"We have our own worlds... We carried our people's bones a thousand days to find a home. When so many were removed, we stayed behind. Who would talk to them out there at night if I never went home?... Luther and I have our tasks there, and [Hoey] has found his world there. He pretends he doesn't understand, but when the time comes he will surpass all of us. Luther has always known that. Hoey is *hoyo*, the hunter, the searcher, the one who seeks and finds." (242-3, italics in original)

For Onatima and for all the characters, responsibility is rooted in place. Back home in Mississippi, she, Luther, and Hoey must tend to their ancestors, whose remains they carried "a thousand days to find a home." In this endeavor, they enact sovereignty, described by Guillermo Delgado (Quechua) and John Brown-Childs (Massachusetts-Brothertown/Oneida/Madagascan) as "bringing our Indigenous past along" (69). As a writer and as one of the characters confronting Robert in the climax, Cole shares a responsibility to the Santa Cruz region, especially the Ohlone. Venancio looks out into for one final time before his "shadow falls across the town and bay, undulating with the slow waves" (243). He is still taken by the cruelty of the missionaries, as reflected by his final, italicized words ("*Eran muy crueles*"), which are also the final words of the novel (243). But in his last act of the book, Venancio returns to the land and waters of the Santa Cruz region. He is, at least temporarily, at greater peace following Cole's and his family's encounter with Robert, who embodies the settler colonialist thinking that perpetuates the necropolitical ideology of the United States toward Natives. If, as Alex points out, the Ohlone did not recognize the world following the arrival of the Spanish, Venancio finally can at the end of the text (54). He returns to the landscape and seascape, receding to a position that is not so much out of reach but all around Cole and anyone else who settles, or "re-replaces," to Santa Cruz (Gamber 229).

This is perhaps the most utopic ending possible in the present day of the novel. Venancio is at peace, Robert has been killed, and Cole's family can return home. Cole has returned to writing, prompted and empowered by the presence of his community who travel across the United States from their home territory. And Abby and Alex, challenging the dominant thinking that the future is somehow incompatible with Natives, have begun a romantic relationship. The novel ultimately shows that perhaps the most sordid feature of the past is thinking that it is beyond reproach, beyond reconciliation. As Venancio shows in his final act, our settler colonialist past is embedded in the lands and seas around us. The ending of the novel is less about finality than transition. While the novel was (and still is) marketed as a murder mystery, the climactic encounter with the murderer, Robert, is less about individual heroics than kinship and responsibility. Rather than signaling a break from the past (sordid as it may be), an Indigenous future deliberately links to it. If, as quoted earlier from Raffaella Baccolini, a dystopia is a world that "depends on and denies history," an Indigenous future is a world that consciously connects with and addresses its injustices.

Notes

¹ In the field of Native American/Indigenous Studies, the term "reconciliation" has become particularly problematic. For an in-depth discussion about how reconciliation, or "reconciliation politics" are deployed by the settler state, please refer to Glen Sean Coulthard's *Red Skin White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*.

² While previously recognized from 1906-1928 as the Verona Band of Indians, the Ohlone of the San Francisco area have struggled to achieve recognition since the 1990s. In 1998, following the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) classification of their application as "Ready Status," the tribe calculated that the process would take 24 years and sued the BIA to expedite the process. Subsequent petitions to the federal government by the Ohlone have been unsuccessful.

³ More recently at the Hearst Museum, Nez Perce writer Beth Piatote staged a reading of her play, *Antíkoni*, a reimagining of Sophocles' *Antigone* that portrays Indigenous resistance through the title character's attempts to retrieve her ancestors' remains.

⁴ In her memoir, *Bad Indians*, Deborah Miranda describes the "Mission Project" assignment of all fourth-graders in the state of California. As Miranda explains, however, the project does not provide students with an honest depiction of the state's genocidal past: rather, it

glorifies the era and glosses over both Spanish and Mexican exploitation of Indians, as well as American enslavement of those same Indians during American rule. In other words, the Mission Unit is all too often a lesson in imperialism, racism, and Manifest Destiny rather than actually educational or a jumping off point for criticism thinking or accurate history." (xvii)

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