

A Renewed Sovereignty:
Deborah Miranda storying ancestral connection to land in *Bad Indians*
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Riddle: when is a lie the truth?
 When is the truth a lie?
 When a lie saves your life,
 That's truth; when a lie saves the lives
 Of your children, grandchildren
 And five generations forward,
 That's truth in a form so pure
 It can't be anything
 But a story.ⁱ

This is a story about lies. Lies about California history and the Catholic missions as told by the dominant historical narrative, and lies told by her ancestors to ensure that Deborah Miranda and her relatives would live. Lies, which are one of the reasons she writes: to rebuild identity for herself and for her community when that identity was temporarily disrupted and dismembered by colonization. But these lies are temporary for those who resist and survive.ⁱⁱ

When certain stories are hidden, as suggested in the poem, it does not mean that they disappear. Stories do not stop holding meaning for relations who may uncover and use them at a later time. And when someone like Miranda learns the true stories of her ancestors, she holds the power to continue that knowledge and correct the lies of the colonial narrative. These stories become dangerous to a national story that disappears or glosses over indigenous presence in California history.

In this short paper, I will tell my own story about how Miranda has altered *my* understanding of history and sovereignty through story. In my own work, a text like Miranda's has served to reveal the lies of colonialism in which I have lived by changing my perception of history and theory from a primarily Westernized version of theorizing to a more nuanced and decolonial perspective of storying and making. Miranda, along with many other storytellers and scholars, has shifted my definition of story to one of theory and belonging. Here I will demonstrate some of the ways in which her story dismantles two particular lies of the colonial narrative, which has served to deepen my understanding of indigenous theory-making and modes of survivance.

I will also show how studying texts like that of Miranda has helped me to work toward a fuller understanding of allied scholarship as a non-indigenous scholar living in a place still deeply affected by colonial practice and thought. I am working to open up space in literary and rhetorical theory for acknowledging and understanding indigenous ways of reading stories of survivance and Native belonging. In doing so, I seek to complicate non-Native understandings of "Native American Literature" to show story as an ongoing practice with power to challenge and transgress dominant paradigms surrounding research, history, memory, and political structures.

Memoir as Resistance to Lies:

Miranda calls her book *Bad Indians* a "tribal memoir." This book is a collection or mosaic of stories from Miranda and her ancestors. One purpose of these stories seems to be to

build a theory of survivance, sovereignty, and healing through memory. Using drawings, charts, poetry, songs, and maps—stories from her ancestors, stories from her own life, and stories that imagine the future—Miranda crafts a narrative that pieces together a collective memory of her community. Through these pieces, Miranda resists colonization (specifically that enacted by the California mission system) that has disrupted her memories in the first place. She resists and decolonizes by putting the stories back together in an act of sovereign belonging to California history and the land. These stories give Miranda and others the power to shift current and future ways of knowing, surviving, and healing from colonial violence and the lies it leaves behind.

Miranda begins by addressing our first lie.

This lie is that told by the Californian third-grader's mission history project—a unit in California's history curriculum that is intended to tell the tale of the Catholic missions. In this lie, the missions are portrayed as peaceful and benevolent communities where padres care for the “poor Indians,” providing them with the safety and prosperity that they could not create for themselves.

Miranda addresses her ancestors' stories using a history book format but correcting the narrative with her own genealogies, glossary definitions, encyclopedic descriptions, timelines, etc. For instance, when she describes adobe bricks, she does so in the context of hard labor, and the mission bells are the “voice of the padres” that must be obeyed (9). She goes on to describe the “tools” of the mission, including those of punishment, employed to ensure that the mission “factory” of labor and conversion runs smoothly (16). This is the narrative behind the idealization of the western coast under rule of the Catholic Church.

Later in the historical narrative, as California is ceded by the Spanish to the U.S., indigenous presence is not only altered with different stories but begins to be disappeared more entirely—the second lie. Colonial narratives tell the story that the Native tribes of California have died, assimilated, or simply disappeared. While this narrative covers a complex range of colonial power structures and purposes, one of the results is that Native people who had been coopted into the Catholic Church cannot return to their lands, even after the dismantling of the mission system.

This happens in spite of the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo that was meant to return Native land stolen under Spanish and Mexican governments. Historian Philip Laverly points out that under this treaty, the U.S. is required to “identify lands owned by Indians deeded under Spanish and Mexican rule” and return them. However, this treaty is sorely neglected when poor documentation, outright thievery, and murder or removal leaves tribes without U.S. legal claim to ancestral lands. Miranda's Esselen tribe, like many others, is caught in an inescapable loop of bureaucracy: The Indian Service Bureau's failure to re-establish Esselen lands has made it difficult to maintain a tribal community with the few survivors of the missions. Proof of this community is required to establish themselves as a recognizable tribe within the dominant political system, which refuses to account for assimilation and state-sponsored violence. In short, the government does not recognize the dispossession that has removed the people from their land in the first place. Without state and federal recognition, it becomes nearly impossible to recover Esselen land bases.

This particular lie continues throughout history to meet further purposes of disappearance in the push to cede western lands into the Union. In her essay “Rhetorics of Survivance,” Malea Powell invokes Richard Drinnon's *Facing West* to say that U.S. empire-building was and is predicated upon erasing memory and making the Indian a figure of the past who must “disappear so that ‘America’ can live” (402). Indigenous scholars, storytellers, and communities push back

against this narrative of disappearance by telling their own stories of presence throughout history. This act of storying is a rhetorical move happening in the 19th century and earlier with orators like William Apress in New England and Andrew Blackbird in Michigan among others. Miranda continues this shift, resisting the silencing of her ancestors' stories. As a result, not only does she build memory and identity for herself and her tribe but also causes readers, like myself, to reconsider the entire empire-building narrative.

Miranda addresses these two particular colonial lies about peace in the missions and then nonexistence on the land with stories about displacement, violence, and rape: trauma experienced by her ancestors and carried in her own body and memory. Miranda brings these stories back to the attention of her general reader but also for herself and her relatives since these stories have not been told publicly. Miranda's ancestors made a choice to not tell these kinds of stories, enacting a different kind of lie: one of survivance. By hiding the stories, Miranda's ancestors allow for her survival so that those narratives can be uncovered later. Miranda speaks of this "lie" in her poem "Lies My Ancestors Told Me," a portion of which is also quoted in the epigraph of this essay:

"Tell the lies now and maybe later / your descendants will dig / for the truth in libraries, / field notes, museums, / wax cylinder recordings, / newspaper reports of massacres / and relocations, clues you left behind / when you forgot / to lie / lie lie lie" (40).

This kind of lie is supposed to protect Miranda and her ancestors from colonial violence, but the stories it hides still exist in memory and in Miranda's own experience.ⁱⁱⁱ

All of these lies—those told by the colonial narrative and those told by the Mission Indians to protect the lives of their descendants—are dismantled and rebuilt by Miranda's memoir as she replaces these lies with new stories. The stories that she is telling are decolonial in the way that they resist colonization through making and remembering. In doing so, Miranda's storied theory is also a politically relevant historical narrative, questioning Western paradigms of government with indigenous definitions of sovereignty.

Miranda crafts a theory of storytelling and memory that can serve to challenge colonial lies about Native history, presence, and dominant views of theory and political sovereignty or recognition. Whereas dominant, Euro-American understandings of sovereignty are about power and political hierarchy, an indigenous paradigm of sovereignty is a highly complex strategy of self-determination, which includes connections to history, land, culture, and memory.

According to Scott Richard Lyons, indigenous claims to sovereignty are attempts to "survive and flourish as a people," and self-determination is vital to recovering and reclaiming land, language, culture, and self-respect (449). This means that sovereignty is not only about political recognition but is also important to autonomy in determining how a community functions on cultural and social levels. However, sovereignty in the Western sense depends on recognition, and dominant culture says that for this to happen, power must be locatable and recognizable (450). Indigenous scholars and storytellers like Miranda challenge these power structures by using methods of story and knowledge that have been passed through generations. At the same time, they are also re-imagining indigenous knowledge-making in decolonial practice to challenge existing paradigms that surround the varying notions of sovereignty. Instead of understanding sovereignty as power, scholars and community members are arguing for sovereignty as a communal process of decision-making and remembering.

Decolonial practices of making use these connections to continuously create Native art and narratives that assert memory as on-going, working towards sovereignty by establishing continued presence. By questioning a colonial narrative of sovereignty, Miranda challenges the

second lie about who belongs to the land and also resists the first lie by re-forming the historical narrative of how the land and the stories were taken in the first place.

Resistance in Community

Miranda joins a community practice of decolonial storytelling by using multiple voices and stories to acknowledge dispossession but refuse the narrative of “lost race.” As she emphasizes in her introduction to the book, taking back the narrative of history is essential to rebuilding community. This community includes individual “selfhood” but also a collective narrative of “nationhood.” Where Miranda could have told only her own story of violence, she instead chooses to narrate it in the context of generations who have experienced trauma starting with the missions. One way that Miranda causes me to revisit my own ideas of story is by complicating the genre space of memoir that, in a Western colonial sense, is typically used to tell a personal story of hurt, growth, healing, etc. Instead, Miranda uses it for individual as well as tribal remembrance that questions lies told by the colonial historical narrative through collective experience.

One way Miranda builds this storied theory of indigenous sovereignty is by reminding her listeners and her community members that it is important to know *who* is telling the story about themselves:

Culture is ultimately lost when we stop telling the stories of who we are, where we have been, how we arrived here, what we once knew, what we wish we knew; when we stop our retelling of the past, our imagining of the futures, and the long, long task of inventing an identity every second of our lives. (xiv)

One of the ways the U.S. government is able to maintain dominant narratives that disappear indigenous peoples is in their use of treaties and treaty-making processes to maintain a nationalistic objective of federal top-down power and politics. Literary scholar Jolie Sheffer calls U.S. policy one of “guardianship” that “[portrays] Native American tribes as adopted or orphaned children in need of paternalistic protection” (133). Rather than recognize sovereignty as Native tribes’ independent ability to make treaties, the government is able to claim tribal lands in the name of guardianship while using the same policies to say that, without land, these tribes do not exist. By “reinventing an identity,” Miranda dismantles the story of guardianship to replace it with a different story of who her people are and the land to which they belong.

Resistance in Blood-Memory

Miranda questions this guardianship narrative by building her own memoir of belonging through what I will call “blood-memory.” I understand this concept as one that ties people to a place in ways that are felt and embodied as well as experienced through ancestral connection^{iv}. Miranda calls the land of Santa Lucia Preserve, part of her family’s original rancheria, a place “to which [she is] bound by blood, history, bone, title, tears, and story” (204). Miranda uses the narrative space in her memoir to not only maintain a connection to lands in and near Monterey, California and along the Santa Ynez River (the land of her ancestors), but also to build a theory behind that connection that is more than the kind of belonging or ownership recognized by the U.S. government.

One of the stories Miranda tells is about her grandfather and a memory that *he* shares about “The Light from the Carissa Plains.” In this story, Miranda’s paternal grandfather, Tom, talks about being drawn to a mysterious light while he is working far away from his birthplace in Monterey: “His yearning toward this light started Tom on a journey around California’s landscape that took most of his life” (194). Miranda explains that Monterey is a place of beginnings, and she too is pulled toward the mountain: “Who we are is where we are from.

Where we are from is who we are” (194). This draw toward the mountain is blood-memory continued through the ancestors to Miranda and those who have been violently displaced but seek the landbase of beginnings. Emergence, identity, and sovereignty are deeply intertwined in Tom’s connection to Mt. Diablo, and by storying these things Miranda builds a similar connection. Memory through bodily longing is not recognized by dominant discourses, but Miranda stories a theory of survivance that resists the separation of body and knowledge. Gerald Vizenor’s term “survivance” evokes the idea of surviving and resisting colonization by telling these stories. In this way, Miranda’s sovereignty is one of self-determination practices through embodied memory and storytelling.

Miranda continues the narrative of her bodily blood-memory of place when she dreams of returning to the land of her ancestors with her sister, encountering the place, the mountains, the soil, the river. She says that in the dream “[her] hands began to ache as if the very earth outside were calling to them” (205). Her emotion for the place is an overwhelming urge for a connection and return to the relationship that her family members had with the land. The longing is not only spiritual but also bodily. When the dream ends, Miranda relates: “I woke up full of tears and wonder and pure joy, lay there for a few minutes awash in those images; then my alarm went off. I leapt up and started writing” (207). In this act of writing, telling the story, Miranda solidifies her imagined encounter with home, connecting to the place as though she were really there.

Just like the story Miranda tells of her grandfather’s longing toward place, she herself demonstrates a similar blood-memory in the way she longs to be returned, not only out of a connection to her ancestors but also out of a physical and spiritual desire that affirms her own indigeneity in terms of place. By connecting her own desire to that of her ancestors, Miranda starts to piece together the past and the future and re-imagines a return to place that will bring healing from the colonial violence that happened there. In addition, she takes this longing seriously as a true blood-connection to the land and thereby demonstrates the reality of her relationship to place that is as much an act of sovereignty as government documents and paper trails. This practice of deconstructing federally accepted ways of belonging to reconstruct her own is vital to a decolonial practice of healing and political action as Miranda builds on indigenous worldviews of belonging and therefore, sovereignty.

Applications

It is also important to note that Miranda extends this practice of storying memory and connection to land to other indigenous communities fighting for political rights to communal sovereignty. Similar to scholars such as Mark Rifkin and Craig Womack, who write about issues of sovereignty and law, Miranda uses her practice of telling stories from her community and ancestors to demonstrate tribal relationship and connection not currently acknowledged by the federal government. At the same time, she begins to shift a colonizer’s view of sovereignty and what “belonging” can mean. Miranda challenges the reader who may buy into the colonial definition of sovereignty that includes top-down policy-making. Instead, she shows us another way of determining political and social recognition and asserts blood-memory as a valid way of knowing and belonging.

This practice is strategic in the way that Miranda brings indigenous Californian paradigms and lifeways to her work in order to replace the dominant lies with a story of survivance—a story not uncomplicated by lies but one of healing and memory.

In this way, Miranda’s stories have shifted my own understanding of how knowledge is made and enacted. While reading *Bad Indians* I was also building theoretical relationships with

other indigenous and decolonial theorists, storytellers, and mentors. By engaging in this conversation, I am working to make space in literary theory for scholars like myself to acknowledge and understand ways of reading texts of survivance and belonging that are indigenous to the land we inhabit. It is important to note that these are certainly not new conversations, but I am working on ways I can honor them in a world where I have been affected by colonialism in a much different way.

The act of colonization extends from the taking of land into attempts to force Native peoples and paradigms into conforming to specific roles within social and political structures. We all become complicit in colonization when we allow Western paradigms to override other ways of making knowledge and crafting theory instead of questioning them. As Deborah Miranda says in another essay, “If you do not examine Native experiences and voices, you agree to live in, and help construct, a culture of erasure, invisibility, lies, disguise” (“What’s Wrong” 334). Personally, it is my role and responsibility to acknowledge my complicity in colonization and listen to other voices so that I can humbly engage in processes of decolonization that seek to right these wrongs while never forgetting them, moving forward into new works of subjecthood based on memory and story.

Thomas King in his landmark text *The Truth About Stories* reminds us that “the truth about stories is that that’s all we are” (153). And at the end of each chapter in this book, King shifts the responsibility of holding a story from himself to his reader, saying that you might forget it, share it, or allow it to change you, but you cannot really stay the same because now you have heard a new story, a new way of looking at the world.

In a sense, I am telling my story about a story. I am asking about the ways in which Miranda’s practice of storying has shifted my own experience and understanding of theory-making. How can I use story to understand constructs like sovereignty differently? What is my active role in such knowledge?

This is where I am beginning: Miranda’s story troubles dominant concepts of history and sovereignty, her making also has potential to shift the the colonizer’s—my—understanding of theory and the nationalistic rhetoric that continues to disappear Native peoples. The question I am asking now: What does this mean for a practice of allied scholarship? Where do I go from here?

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ⁱ This is an excerpt from Deborah Miranda's poem "Lies My Ancestors Told Me" that is a piece of her book.

ⁱⁱ This idea of resisting and surviving is captured in Gerald Vizenor's term "survivance." As I have explored in more depth elsewhere, acts of survivance may use dominant practices and discourses to allow for survival in a colonial and "post-colonial" world but also resist those narratives to continue autonomous traditions, practices, politics, literatures, etc.

ⁱⁱⁱ In finding and telling almost parallel stories about her ancestors and herself, particularly as women who experience violence, Miranda connects her own memory to that of her relatives. While this web of memory is something that I cannot get into now for the sake of time, this narrative as healing is something I would love to explore further.

^{iv} The idea of "blood-memory" is an old one that is some ways tied to ancestral memory but has to do with felt embodiment as well as historical connections. Native scholars such as Dian Million, Scott Momaday, Lee Maracle, Malea Powell, and others have written about blood-memory and similar concepts.