Decolonize Your Mind:
Remembering Violence and Disrupting Colonial Narratives in Gastown, Vancouver, BC.

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Decolonize Your Mind

My camera is cold in my hands, despite the February sunshine. I am standing in the middle of West Cordova Street in downtown Vancouver. This is the outer edge of the business district, but it is starting to feel like the downtown eastside: a few bleak, empty buildings, seedy hotels, grimy sidewalks, and dismal alleys. The sad spire of the abandoned Woodward's building takes up most of the available sky, a memorial to defeated affordable housing initiatives and a reminder of the gentrification turf-war that persists in this part of the city.

I imagine myself as a tourist, and I look through the lens of my camera for the moments that might catch a tourist's eye. I walk east until I am presented with both a fork in the road and a choice: to go right, along Cordova Street, towards the Woodward's building and into the downtown eastside, or left, along Water Street, into the tourist destination known as Gastown. The first choice could mean coming into contact with homeless people, prostitutes, and HIV-infected syringes, while the second seems to ensure a safer, cleaner, more comfortable experience. I am a tourist, so I choose Gastown. I am, however, a critical tourist, and I find myself drawn to particular images: *Canada*. *Nation. Progress*. And, everywhere I look, *Indian*.

Why are tourists so drawn to this part of the city? Today it is cold and deserted, Valentine's Day, with just a few upscale restaurants starting to fill up for lunch. The thematic gaslights that line Water Street look less atmospheric during the day, but their presence reassures me, the tourist, that I am in the right place. I keep walking. I begin to see that Culture is for sale here. I walk into a store that is full of plains headdresses, northwest coast carvings, dream catchers, and fridge magnets. Edward Curtis-type

portraits of noble 'Chiefs' line the walls. The young woman behind the cash register looks tired of this job, ignores me, and talks on a cell phone to her friend. I step back onto the street, and walk a little further.

I come to a photo studio where I can have my portrait taken dressed as a frontier character—fur trader, rum-runner, saloon girl, gangster, or Indian. 'Indian' is a popular theme, and several portraits are displayed of non-native families dressed up in buckskin and beads. In another, a man in buckskin and fur cap poses with his rifle and women wearing costumes that combine saloon-whore and squaw; beads, corset, and a bottle of Jack Daniels are balanced against fish-netted thigh while the man stands above his sitting women, gun in hand. All of these portraits articulate fantasies of a Canadian past. History in this photo studio is recreated by individuals who are given the tools to project their interpretations of native/non-native relations in to the past, thereby validating their fantasies. Each history is imagined. Authenticity is sepia-toned.

Gastown is centered around a large steam clock that whistles every hour, reminding us that time has passed. A plaque at its base informs readers that this is the world's first steam-powered clock, "created for the enjoyment of everyone". The Gastown Steam Clock bills itself as a symbol of progress, technology, and efficiency; it stands in contrast to the representations of First Nations people that fill Gastown souvenir shops and native art galleries. The clock speaks of ingenuity and inventiveness, a reminder of past innovation, a validation of western technological superiority; it connects the tourist to their sepia-toned photographs, and claims authority over the history of this place. The "Indian" tourist kitsch that surrounds the clock does not speak at all, conveying the image of an Indian that exists only as a part of the history that the narrative

of steam-clock and frontier character defines. Philosopher Jean Baudrillard tells us "we require a visible past, a visible continuum, a visible myth of origin, which reassures us about our end" (1994:10). Similarly, Benedict Anderson has presented the idea of the nation as an imagined community with "a deep horizontal comradeship" (1991:7), that looms "out of an immemorial past, and, still more important, glide[s] into a limitless future" (1991:11-12). The juxtaposition of the Gastown steam clock with colonial representations of indigenous people creates a history of Canada that is, as sociologist Renissa Mawani has pointed out, "a simultaneous evocation and erasure of Native peoples" (2003:100). For Mawani, seen in the context of the creation of Vancouver's Stanley Park, this is a history of "colonial triumph, progress and city making, a narrative that has obscured the displacement and resistance from Aboriginal peoples" (2003:133).

What is Canada? I walk into "Steam Clock T-shirts and Souvenirs," whose shelves provide me with a kind of answer. Here I can purchase maple syrup, totem poles, moccasins, and jade. I can also buy oven mitts, key chains, teacups, stuffed Mounties, smoked salmon and hockey jerseys. Canadian identity is for sale, and the concept of "Indian" features prominently in it. The walls are filled with Indian dolls. On one shelf, they are adult men and women, inches tall, staring out at the world with blank curiosity or crouched in fear, chest bare, spear in hand. On another shelf they are dark skinned, black-haired, wide-eyed children. They wear hide-clothing and beaded headbands, or sleep nestled into cute little moccasins. The most expensive of the bunch is adorned with feathers. One little doll, hands raised as if asking to be picked up, has maple leaves painted on her buckskin dress. These Indian dolls, along with maple syrup and hockey jerseys, are souvenirs of Canada. As a tourist, I am presented with a "continuation of the

West's assumed right to use native figures, myths and visual arts for various purposes–including the colonization of native culture–in a search for its own 'roots'"(Crosby 1991:271-272). I can purchase and use these representations of Indian-ness to construct and validate my own understanding of Canada and its colonial history. What is not made clear to me, the tourist, is that in this place where native culture and identity are appropriated to define what Canada is and is not, "the social reality of many indigenous peoples belies the sanitized images of their lives and cultures which feature so prominently in tourist and related advertising and marketing" (Meekison 2000:110). Gastown actively resists its proximal connection to the downtown eastside, Canada's poorest postal code, a part of Vancouver known for poverty, addiction, and prostitution. Its tourist shops and galleries curate representations that do not disrupt non-native assumptions about First Nations people. These popular, commodified stereotypes "fail to challenge the fundamental power relations between peoples of privilege and peoples of disadvantages" (Godwell 2000:243). As I walk back on the street, I have no idea that today, for a moment, this will change.

I am standing outside of "Hill's", a Gastown emporium that sells Cowichan-knit hats for $15, and totem poles for $15,000. It will ship rainbow-colored dream catchers or bent-wood boxes anywhere in the world. I can buy carved silver jewelry, Cowichan sweaters, moccasins, Susan Point prints, or Jim Charlie masks. I am peering through the window, and the masks are staring back, when I hear a voice behind me. I hear singing. I hear drumming. I turn around. At least 300 First Nations people are walking up Water Street toward me. I can't even see where this mass of people ends, they are still coming around the corner and up the street. A group of elders leads this procession; they hold

drums and carry baskets of roses. The people behind them are singing. They carry banners and signs. Some are smiling and laughing, and some are crying. The parade stops outside of a cheap Gastown hotel. The elders smudge the doorway with sage and sing a prayer song. A native woman died here, in this hotel. They place bunches of roses on the street outside the hotel, a valentine for her. She is one of over seventy women that have gone missing on the downtown eastside since 1975, my lifetime.

The group begins to move again, to sing and drum together. I am a tourist, a critical one, and this sudden disruption of the Gastown narrative is cutting me to the core. I walk with them, along Water Street, past the steam clock, past the tourist kitsch vendors. We stop at another hotel, and then another, and then another. Native women, many of them, have died in Gastown, victims of drug and alcohol abuse, and violence. We are taking a tour.

We are marching along Cordova Street. People are singing, they are talking to each other. I see someone I know, a young First Nations filmmaker with purple hair and big 1970's sunglasses. She is here with her parents, with her friends. "Hey, movie star," says a middle-aged woman, with a smile, as she passes by. We talk about this march, and about Gastown. "Hill's is like Walmart," she says, and we laugh. We stop to watch a woman writing with chalk on the street: NO MORE VIOLENCE. A man draws a big heart in the road. Another writes: FIRST NATIONS RULE. Ahead of me a man wears a red T-shirt that reads: CARA ELLIS R.I.P. This shirt will not be found for sale in Gastown.

The group gathers in front of the Vancouver Police Station. Men and women carrying a banner made of up hand-quilted panels, representing each of the missing women, form a circle around the marchers. Elders position themselves on the main stairs of the police station. Two sisters, who have been carrying a poster-board collage of photographs all through the march, ascend the stairs and take the microphone. They tell the story of their mother, Elsie Jones Sebastian, who went missing on the downtown eastside thirteen years ago. They talk about how Elsie grew up in poverty, and how she suffered in residential school. They say that she was deeply wounded by her experiences, and looked to drugs and alcohol as a means of coping with her pain and fear. Her children, the two women who are speaking, were apprehended by family services. Elsie was last seen on Vancouver's downtown eastside, working the streets as a prostitute. They do not know what happened to her, and they still can't understand how someone, their mother, can just disappear. But the real tragedy, the women say, is that their mother's story is not unique. They ask the crowd, the police, the city: Where is the safety net that that the government talks about? There was no safety net for our mother. How many women will have to go missing before something is done? How can we break this cycle?

Elsie Jones Sebastian's history, like that of the other missing women, is erased in Gastown's meta-narrative of Canadian history and identity. Gastown wants to tell a story of success, of history, and of progress. Representations of First Nations people are an important part of this history, but within this small tourist trap, their imagined manifestation, their simulacra, has come to take the place of the real (Baudrillard 1994). The image, according to Darren Godwell, "is perceived as having more legitimacy than

the ‘reality’. The image and the non-indigenous imagination which created its boundaries assume the measure of authenticity against which contemporary activity, behavior, and images are constructed” (2000:255-256).

One last speaker takes the microphone on the stairs of the Vancouver Police Station. *Decolonize your mind*, she tells us. *Just because these women are missing doesn’t mean that they aren’t important. We are suffering at the hands of systemic racism. We need to recognize the aboriginal women in our society! Decolonize your mind! Let’s reclaim our traditions, our cultural practices. Let’s seek the teachings of our ancestors, the original people. Let’s decolonize our minds! This police station is a symbol of justice, but it only serves itself. We can’t wait for justice. There is no justice on stolen land.*

Every Valentine’s Day, First Nations people, with their friends and allies, walk the streets from Gastown to Chinatown, to honor and remember the missing women of the downtown eastside. Their march represents a critical intervention into the damaging representation of First Nations people that is propagated by the city of Vancouver, and by the nation. This appropriation, according to Ruth Phillips,

> requires the narrative positioning of indigenous people as predecessors to white settlement. Removed from the main story they become marginal, sources of picturesque detail and local color who lend distinctiveness to the national self-image, but who cannot be allowed to speak as full members of an international community (2000:180).

This march is a form of resistance. First Nations people gather in Vancouver to assert their presence, to assert their voice. They come together with their allies to assert a “reconstitution of community and the particular” (Lash and Urry in Phillips 2000:191).

They write on the street. They speak to the city. They speak to me. *Decolonize your mind.*

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