

**By Some Trick of the Light my Skin was Darker**

**by**

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## **Abstract**

The thesis “By Some Trick of the Light my Skin was Darker” explores the driving forces of my work. The title refers to a kind of primal scene in my youth when I first entertained the tensions of being half-native and half-Caucasian. I realized that through a trick of the light caused by the refraction of water I could be native in spite of my white appearance. Using the discourses of colonialism, cultural appropriation, identity politics and an expanded notion of painting that verges on the practices of presentation and display I interrogate the problem of hybridity. I argue my practice of painting is an externalization or literalization of an internal tension that is constitutive of the self. Through stories and experiences of my life on and off the reservation, inside and outside the studio, through written prose and poetic repetition I hope to help viewers better understand the esoteric elements in my work.

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## You'll be as Dark as me

I'm no more than five and playing outside with my sister. We'd play pretend, becoming the best at whatever we imagined: athletes, knights, geologists, etc. By this age I had become totally enamored, not by my own imagination, but, by other manufactured realities; Sesame Street, Sonic the Hedgehog, Biker Mice from Mars. And, instead of staying out to play pretend, I returned inside, back to where the television would take me further than a rural reserve. It would take me to places as far off and mythical as Toronto or New York. But because of this my sister would become sad.

"No, stay. Stay outside with me," she would plead.

At five, I couldn't be bothered to care about what my sister wanted and I would refuse her pleading.

"Shows can't watch you," she continued, "If you stay outside with me, your hair and skin, will become darker, as dark as mine and dads."

At age five much like at six, I wanted this more than ever: to be as dark as my father; to be as dark as the first person of Canada. Whether at age five I already knew that her promise seemed too good to be true, or if it was just that the struggles of the Power Rangers that compelled me to go back inside, I cannot say. Regardless my skin remained pale.



*Fig 1, Phoenix Thomas, Yeah, He's an Indian, 2015*

## **The Boy in the Bath**

When I was no more than six, I would take baths in the tub.

I would let the water run off and on my body.

And by some trick of the light my skin would look darker: as dark as Adam Beach's.

For those brief seconds I was brown(ish).

I was Indian.

I was just that much closer to being Indigenous.

When I was about six,

I would be bathing.

I would let the water pool then run off and back on my body. And

by some trick of the light my skin would look dark

Dark enough to be convincing.

For those brief seconds I was a shade.

I was Indigenous.

I was just that much closer to being Aboriginal.

## He's Cams Cousin

One day, my father, Jeff Thomas and I were walking. Like most Indians living under the poverty line on welfare, we didn't have a car, so we walked, or biked on occasion, everywhere. It was a Friday in August or some month when the temperatures rose above 30 degree Celsius or 90 degree Fahrenheit. (I live too close to the border between Canada and the U.S. to ever finally pick between one or the other.) Fridays are

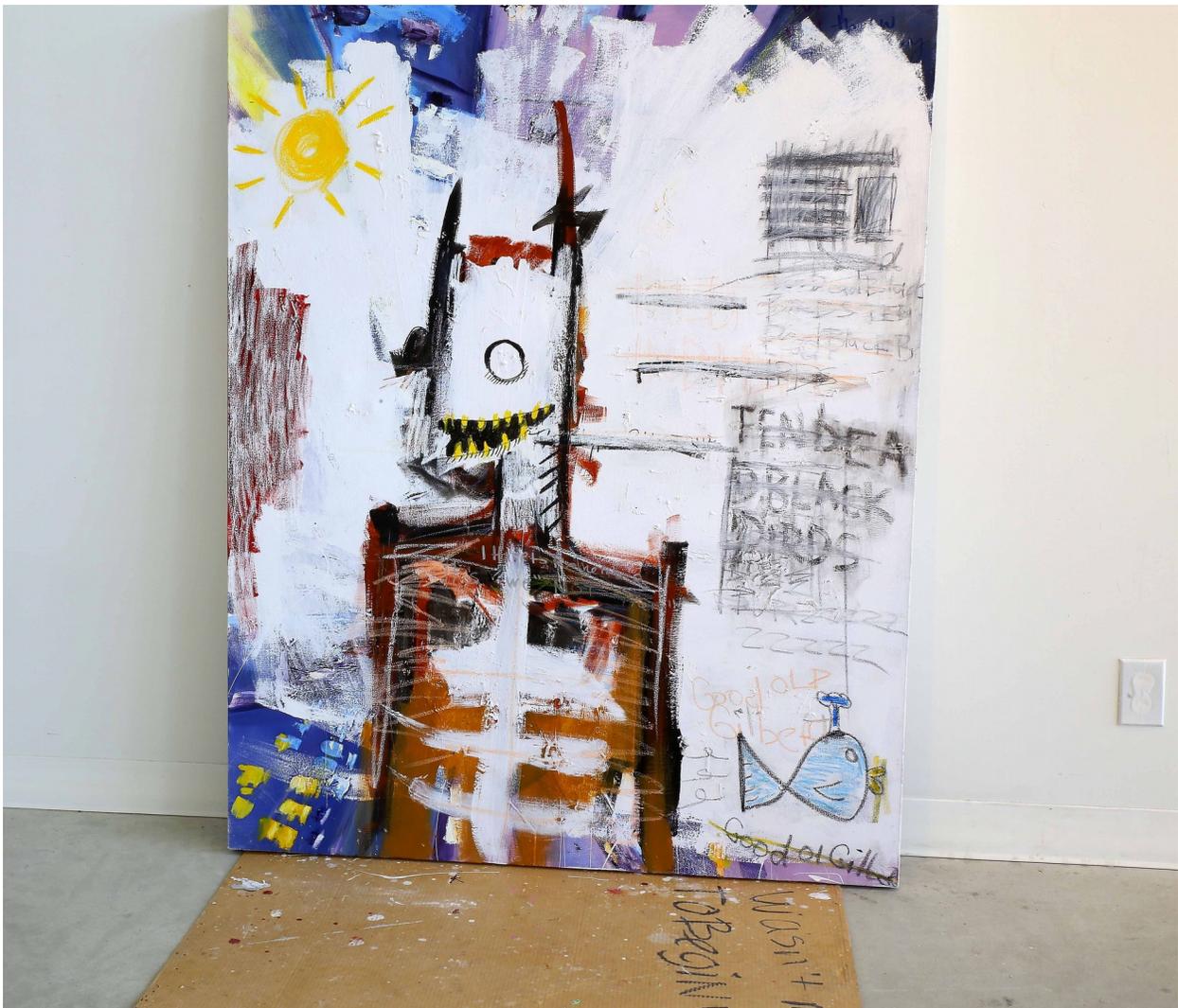


Fig 2, Phoenix Thomas. *Wasn't Mine to Begin with.* 2015,

a special day for my family and I. We'd rent a movie and make some frozen pizzas and be entertained for the night. This would allow us to be anywhere. One particular Friday we were walking to the one place you could rent movies on the reserve, the Pit Stop, a convenience store. We walked and talked. What we talked about for the life of me I couldn't tell you. But it was more than likely, about divining for water and the shape and name of the stick required. Halfway there, we were interrupted by a group of men all sitting on their porch: the Blackbirds, I can never forget that family name. One of them shouted, "Who's that white boy?" And my father responded, "He's Cam's cousin". Cam is my uncle's wife's son. She had him in a previous marriage before settling down with my uncle. The exchange finished just as easily as that.

"He's Cam's cousin."

Neither of us really addressed why he had said that, what I recall is that we carried on walking and talking about another topic, but no longer about divining for water. We made it to the mall shortly after. We rented our movie and walked back home. Frozen pizzas were waiting for us on arrival and our Friday night came to slow end.

## He'll be in Hell

When I was seventeen I fell in love with a pastors daughter. I was jealous of the love she showed God. (Jealous I guess I'd have to share her affections.) But I digress this isn't about that. I became "born again."

...I got this notion in my head that since neither my father nor my mother were Christians, like myself, we were fated to hell. Try as I might, I couldn't convert him. (As if I could fault an indigenous man with having a problem with the church.) And so he was doomed to hell because of my inability to change his mind. (Why God wouldn't just empower me to be super convincing, I'll never know). All I could think was, he'll be in hell, he'll be in hell.

Regardless, I still wanted to believe that he'd go to the "happy hunting ground" he had told me about. This was the place where all dead Indians (first nations/indigenous/whatever) go; where there is endless game & you always hunt on a full stomach. So in my heart of hearts I couldn't really be sure he was damned. So I stopped believing in God. Of course, there are other reasons as well, mostly to do with the pastors daughter who became my ex-girlfriend. (We don't talk much anymore, me and her, and me and god as well.)

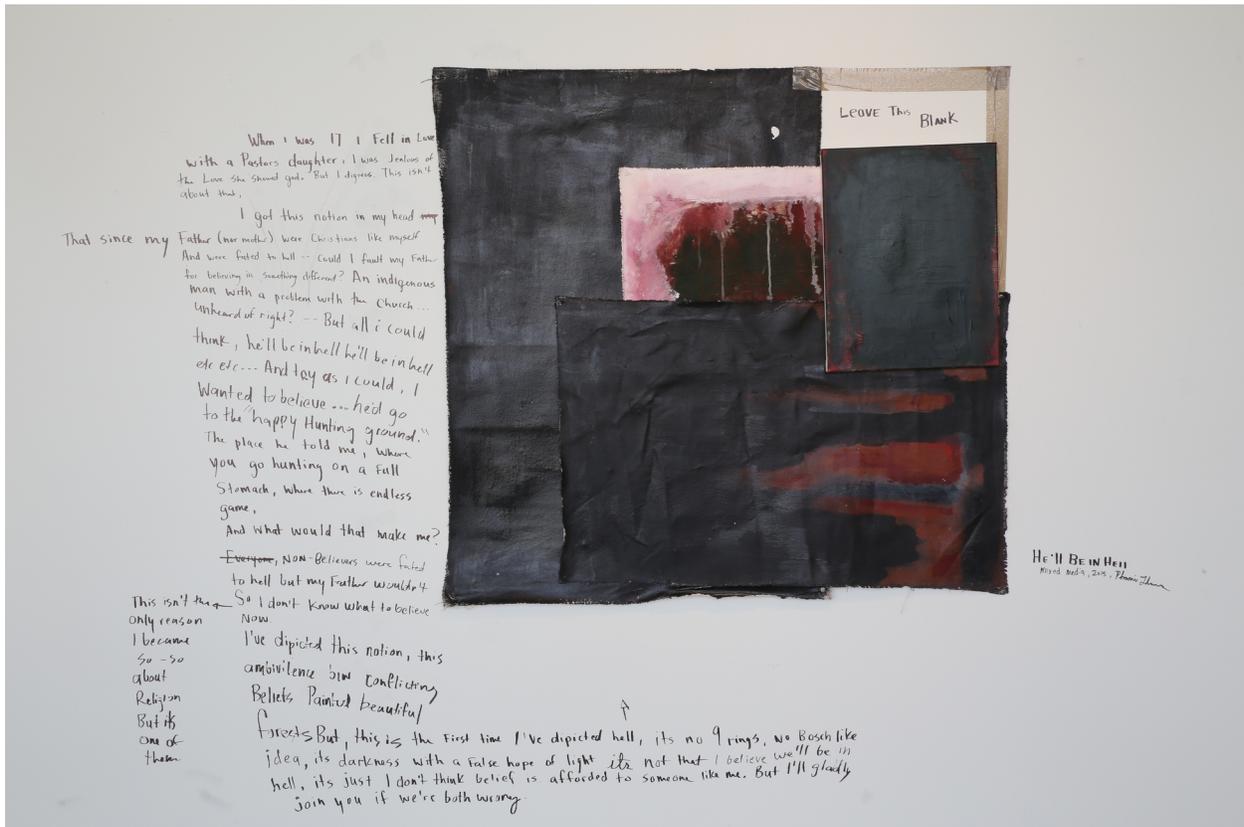


Fig 3, Phoenix Thomas, *He'll be in Hell*, 2015

Later as an artist, I depicted my fathers "happy hunting ground." I painted beautiful forests and pastoral lands filled with animals beckoning and welcoming. My "Hell" with 9 circles or rings, and nothing like Bosch's concept, is also present. I think of it as darkness with a false ray of hope. Its not that I believe we're going to hell anymore. Its just that I don't believe belief is afforded to someone stuck in limbo. But I'll gladly join you if we're both wrong.

## Scottish Redness and Indigenous Whiteness

Being half-native and appearing Caucasian, has lead me to experience several existential crises throughout my life. In order to find myself I have searched a string of binaries that lead back through a complicated family tree that flip between Whiteness and Redness and Redness and Whiteness, but also Indigenous Redness and Scottish Whiteness, Scottish Redness and Indigenous Whiteness. Where I fall in the red/white colour spectrum is an endless question. Racial dysphoria<sup>1</sup> or not, I rework these tensions into creative expressions, at times poetic, at times prosaic, at times painterly and of course at times poetic and painterly at the same time. Out of these rigid binaries and hybrid moments I make sense of a seemingly senseless situation. This opens up to a range of broader issues that afflict indigenous peoples across North America. It allows me to see both sides of any conflict, ambivalence being an irony I am as happy to live by as die by. Catharsis is continuous.

I dramatize all of this. Through the use of anecdote, obsession, analogy, memory, repetition, motif, and aphorism I tell stories in space (Savitskaya, 2014)<sup>2</sup> that combine text and painting. This hybrid form of storytelling that is allegorical through and through reflects upon and instructs in indigenous knowledge, culture and experiences. And I am the first to admit that the teaching is being taught by someone who is potentially as ignorant of the cosmologies, philosophies and beliefs of the First Peoples as the viewer. As an outsider in my own community I use my own ambivalence towards indigenous life and identity as a motor for dialogue. For example, “Chief Joey Gilbert Believes in God, do you?” Or “Do we Believe in the Land Bridge?” These simple questions that appear

as recurrent motifs in my painting pose rhetorical questions that challenge and question contemporary viewpoints on assimilation. Can Indigenous people believe in a God used to justify cruel acts of assimilation? Do we accept the theoretical possibility of human migration if that theory challenges the legitimacy of older Indigenous beliefs? What if we're just immigrants all the same? Is crossing the bearing straight by foot any different than arriving by boat? Posing questions such as these that make viewers think; can an indigenous culture that is truly alive assimilate and integrate such concepts?

### **Legitimacy: This is to certify**

Historically I lean especially on artists who tackle issues of racial identity. I have learned what has made their work successful and I try to build on their success. Key among these figures are Jimmie Durham who constantly pokes away at the notion of authenticity in Indian art, Glenn Ligon who “mines” the rich history of African-American experience, and finally the poet Sherman Alexie, who writes about the day-to-day lives of Indigenous people, through an autobiographical optic that is uniquely his own.

Jimmie Durham's practice aims to explore and display the ridiculous paradoxes and flawed system of the authentic Indian. He writes, “We’re given authenticity...we have inflicted it upon ourselves. So Indians want to be authentic, to see ourselves as authentic, especially for those who see us as authentic” (qtd. in Shiff 76). Durham's work subverts the conventional signifier's of authenticity and aims to develop a tradition that can authenticate itself and himself. I am intrigued by Durham's thoughts on this point for Durham understands that indigenous 'legitimacy' is something that is not in the hands of indigenous peoples but instead in the hands of the majority who need to

construct an indigenous other. My own contribution to Durham's discussion is to create autobiographical work that teeters on the edge of authenticity; that ultimately will refuse to decide about life and identity on the reserve; that questions the deepest notions of authenticity we harbor within ourselves, both from the inside and the outside.

Glenn Ligon mines the history of African Americans in America. His work aims to show that racism in spite of the Civil War and Civil Rights is alive and well. He holds a mirror up to society, showing the grim truths of equality to be a new form of enslavement. Ligon's works never fail to enlighten and never fail to inspire. Like Ligon who tends to draw on both the anonymous and spectacular events that have made up African-American history (Copeland 79) and somehow shaped himself, my work leans heaviest on the contemporary myths of indigenous Canadians as they have informed my own biography. Further I have adopted his interest in text and have tended to avoid the image. Finally I have appropriated aspects of his typographic and historical work in order to archivally mine colonialism in Canada, confederation and the Indian Act. Like his work, my content is rich, a valuation that tends to lose its luster the more history tends toward the autobiographical. This said, I am interested in making my personal experiences at least as valued as history, if only to make my experience speak for Canadian Indigenous peoples in general.

Sherman Alexie, writes poems primarily aimed towards addressing the daily lives of Indians from the North West United States. His work is an attempt to suture the rift that exists between Native-American literature and the concerns of everyday natives. His hunch is that the endless stereotyping and romanticizing of Indigenous peoples

ultimately diminish White America's broken relationship with the Indian. Similar stereotypes can be found at work in Canada and in fact Alexie's key themes resonate deeply within me. Like Alexie I assume the stance of the colonizer and the colonized. Alexie, understands that holding onto an us versus them mentality is dangerous and regressive (Moyers and Company). For him tribalism has no place in moving forward. And if Alexie discusses life on his reserve and I talk about life on mine, I think there is room to imagine each of us playing characters in each other's worlds: he in my paintings and me in his poetry. Alexie's dictum to "challenge, anger and possibly offend" (qtd. in Grassian 14), is a shibboleth that I too stand behind. We both realize there is a level of ignorance.

Finally I have learned a lot from Carl Beam. Beam is someone who knows it is necessary to honor tradition. He understands traditions, were adapted to each tribe and each belief (qtd. in Townsend-Gault 52). Further he understood indigenous people are arrested in their development, or stuck as it were, playing the same old songs and stories. I balance Beam's notion of pure repetition off of Thomas King's more optimistic notion of imperfect repetition<sup>3</sup>. Perhaps, stories do change over time, over and over again, or at least that is what I would like to think when I'm repeating myself.

## **Scatter Art**

Up until this point, I have addressed my motivations for doing art and covering the people who inspire and influence my practice. Despite this effort and their inclusion their aesthetics is not entirely indicative of how my work progresses out of the studio.

The actual execution and presentation of my art derives from the scatter art movement. Scatter art does not have one definition and the aesthetic is used differently from artist to artist. A general definition of scatter art is; installations that incorporates seemingly random assemblages of junk, it derives from Robert Rauschenberg's "combines," which were descendents [sic] of Dadaist collage (Cook). In this case I primarily adapt the practice of Karen Kilimnk, as I find her approach closely relates to my other inspirations. Kilimnk practice ties together eclectic paintings and objects to create a unique world, fusing fantasy and the phenomenon of celebrity. Implicating a connection between the two through clever installations that utilize as much of her own painting to equal amounts of appropriated imagery. Consequently using all these elements to create unique situations where the identity of these images and objects become approximations between each other, creating a new imaginary existence with her subjects (Stiener 21). As a result they become new symbols and ideas juxtaposed amongst each other, creating new semiotic language with her subjects but leaving enough space for interpretation.

In this way I am interested in developing a method of painting that incorporates the curatorial approach of scatter artists. So I can connect disparate concepts as varied as, Beringia and Alfred Wegener<sup>4</sup> to come up with unconventional perspectives, about how I interpret my indigenous identity. I aim to create a way to literalize my ambivalent dysphoria, making balanced and thought provoking installations that are inspired out of my stories that combine text, painting and objects. As Kilimnik would, I create new

associations with subject and object by juxtaposing them and inviting interpretation to these esoteric connections.

However as much as I have gone out of my way to make scatter art its own heading and execution. I can't say Kilimnik and scatter art is so separate from my other inspirations. As I have previously stated Kilimnik's practice most relates to my previous inspirations. In a like manner, Carl Beam juxtaposes esoteric subjects, aiming as Kilimnik would to draw conclusions between subjects of recognition and obscurity (Stiener 22). Thus attempting to interpret between one subject we can easily recognize and draw a new meaning of that subject in relation with another subject we may not recognize. Hence with his work, *Ceramic bowl ("Anne Frank 1924 – 1945")*, (1987), Carl Beam uses this work to draw parallels between two genocides. In this work Beam juxtaposes the Holocaust with early colonial genocides, using an art style from one race who suffered from genocide, the Mogollon tribes, to depict a person from another race of people who experienced genocide, Anne Frank and the Jews; demonstrating that one genocide is approximately as bad as the other<sup>5</sup>.

## **Symbols**

In my work, as I have said, I utilize esoteric analogies to draw new perspectives on analyzing my identity. Regarding these elements, many of which are pictorial and appropriated, they have become essential in my work as motifs. As such they are as recurrent as the rhetoric questions that permeate through my work. That is they have become symbolic stand ins for indigenous culture that are removed from identifying

through superficial signifiers. Specifically they are through proximity of subjects in my art implicated as symbols, of which till then they had been open to any interpretation.

Especially, my usage of the image of an elephant, which has become my analogous symbol for indigenous peoples. Namely I draw a comparison between the First Peoples and the animal, through the idiom; 'the elephant in the room'. So as to relay the state of contemporary indigenous peoples of that of something that goes purposefully unaddressed in most societies. Symbols such as the elephant have become my cultural short hand for referencing indigenous peoples without portraying them as stereotypical. Granted refer to a group of peoples as an animal may have its own issues. Albeit, I feel analogizing Indigenous people to an elephant is not used to deprecate them. That is to say an elephant has no adverse meanings racially associated with it and Indigenous peoples.

My use of colour as well has very specific symbolic connotations. That is not to say it is a new concept that certain colours have symbolic uses varying from culture to culture. As for example the medicine wheel in indigenous culture has four colours that are significant in own cultural context. Where as my use of colour is a specific reference to the colours of skin. That is to say I use certain colours in my art to stand in for specific races of people. This is done to allow colour and its symbolic uses to play multiple roles for me. Anytime a shade of red is used, its to symbolically reference indigenous peoples, using the historic offensive 'red man', as the metaphoric identifier when used. In contrast, when I use shades of paint that are the closest match to actual colours of skin, they are used as approximate portrayals of peoples race in a non-stereotypical

fashion. I will often pair these colours with a regretful text that states how sorry I am about turning people into metaphors through colour. To convey to the viewers an admission of guilt that demonstrate I'm specifically using stereotypical colours ironically. Colour become avatars of certain races for me and are used as empathetic moments to speak in their voice, one that I often feel un-entitled to utilize for being Caucasian in appearance. Several times in my work colour has had a very specific use in conveying itself as a metaphor through medium. The act of using white paint to paint over red becomes a literalized white washing in my art. In this case 'white washing' comes to symbolize my inability to feel entitled to personifying indigenous culture in my art.

One such work that demonstrates all these symbolic elements and scatter is, *Beds are for Winners (2015)* (See Fig. 4). In this work I utilizes the metaphors of colour and skin, imagery as analogy, and utilizing three dimensional space with text scrawled all over. Above all, *Beds are for Winners (2015)*, uses all these parts of my practice layered on top of each to form a meta narrative focused around my half-indigenous identity.



Fig. 4, Phoenix Thomas, *Beds are for Winners*, 2015.

Firstly a painting is hung on the wall, and then subsequent objects, paintings or other elements are hung or leaned against that primary canvas. Creating a dialogue between one instance of painting and another, where the relationship between painting and the wall are fusing and juxtaposing off of one another. All in order to tie together my core themes of scatter and race. The two paintings hung on top of the primary one are coloured white and red. The white painting has adorned on it a diagram of an epidermis painted red, paired with text written 'how deep does it go' (See Fig. 6) literalizing the 'skin deep' metaphor in relation to race. By proximity the red painting plays off this metaphoric colour question and becomes the indigenous red. Albeit people can just as easily slip by this and just read the meta of a painting hung on top of another. Either way it still services my needs in conveying the questions I have about the constructs of race.



Fig. 5, Phoenix Thomas, *Beds are for Winners*, detail 1, 2015

Secondly, image as analogy plays out in this work through small vignettes scattered throughout the work. For example a diagram of a skeletal turtle is paired with the name, 'Alfred Wegner [sic]<sup>6</sup>' (See Fig. 5). Alfred Wegener was the man attributed to the, Continental Drift Theory, which was the theory that the continents of the world used to be one and then drifted apart after millions of years. Likewise indigenous belief has it that the continents and land of the earth all reside on the backs of giant turtles and slowly drift about. In other words it is not all that different of an idea to equate one to the other. Admittedly one of course is a scientific theory and the other is a spiritual belief. However drawing a comparison to the two acknowledges that there are parallels between western scientific thought and indigenous beliefs. It lessen the nature of the

red white binaries like 'do we believe in the land bridge?' and gives hope that there are certain things that we as different people can occasionally come to terms with.

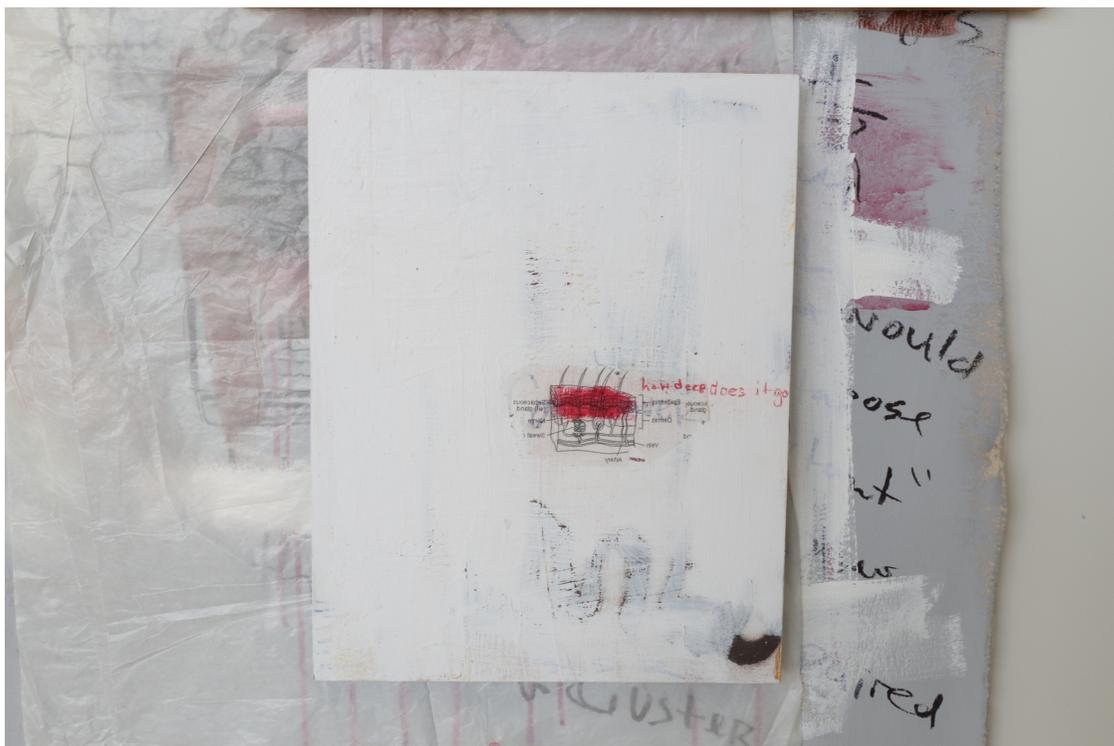


Fig. 6, Phoenix Thomas, *Beds are for Winners*, detail 2, 2015

The text in this work uses previous techniques like labeling an image, like Alfred Wegener, or commenting on an image to bring depth to it, 'how deep does it go' (See Fig. 6). There is however, in my work instances where I use text that is improvised through free association<sup>7</sup>. Where it is not my intention to directly speak about something present in the work but make disparate connections to themes associated throughout my practice. For example there are times where the text itself carries its own weight as an instance within the work; '*I'd wear my hair in a braid, if it wouldn't afro*' which communicates an inability for me to adhere to an Ojibwa tradition because of my

Scottish biological heritage<sup>8</sup>. The text itself contains enough loaded meaning that it could be expanded into its own work. However, the text is necessary here in tying the painting back to the ambivalent struggle of my half-indigenous life.



Fig. 7, Phoenix Thomas, *Beds are for Winners*, detail 3, 2015

Lastly, the final use of text in this work also pulls the painting into three dimensional space with the cardboard laid out in front of it (See Fig. 7). Specifically this is a borrowed element from the scatter art aesthetic informed through Rauchenberg. Where they expand off of artistic surfaces of the wall and into the installed space. The cardboard reads: 'beds are for winners' where the work gets it's title from, invoking the imagery of a bed with a folded blanket at one end, becoming a pillow. This is a loose inclusion of attaching poverty to the entire experience. Which I felt was indicative of my indigenous experience as I had spent at least more than half my life on some level of

welfare. Admittedly it may come off as a mixed metaphor amongst all the other elements present. All the same, in conjunction with everything present, which were at times created separate from one another and then installed here, it all adds visual depth to my interests of painting and scatter art. Creating a new way of telling a story about my life as a half-indigenous person.

## Conclusions

I am a half-native appearing Caucasian, and this has given me the opportunity to see both sides of this colonized and the colonizer relationship. It has allowed me to view redness not as just Indigenous red, but as Scottish red, to see whiteness not only as Scottish white but Indigenous white. Despite this, it has caused me times of confusion and isolation from places I should feel at home. Indeed the concepts of race are not as fluid to me as they once were when I was that, *Boy in the Bath*, they have become rigid binaries that I have to navigate wherever I go. Even so, by directing ambivalence at both halves, this has given me the insight to tell stories that are not vested in either camps demonizing or valorize of one another. I am given the freedom to tell stories that are in service of not answering questions, but instead posing questions that make people potentially reflect upon their relationships with one another. I want my art to be a soundboard for all these issues of dysphoria. Because piece by piece, I'm finding an answer in being Half-Native.

## The Kitten/Cat Joke

What looks like a white man,

Sounds like a white man,

Acts like a white man,

But Isn't,

...

A half-native,

this half native.

I

V

Phoenix Thomas

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Racial Dysphoria is a term I adapted from Gender Dysphoria. Recently it has had use in the Transracial issue concerning, Rachel Dolezal, who had deceptively led a life as a self-identified black person, although being born white, I didn't address Dolezal's perspective due to her controversy and because of how differing our situations were and decided to maintain focus on my dysphoria of being half.
- <sup>2</sup> "Telling Stories in Space" is an artistic strategy of Artist Nedko Solakov. Where his use of written text is used on all surfaces of the gallery. Treating them as equal spaces for working on and off of (Savitskaya), I adopted this phrasing when I had begun to 'spill' off conventional surfaces and adopted a 'scattered' approach to work.
- <sup>3</sup> Kings, *The Truth About Stories*, begins each anecdotal tale with a creation story about the earth being on the back of a turtle and subtly changes the details from each iteration.
- <sup>4</sup> Beringia being the landmass or land bridge that bridged eastern Russian and Alaska during the Ice Age and Alfred Wegener being the man attributed to creating the *Continental Drift Theory*.
- <sup>5</sup> Likewise Alexie utilizes this same parallel between Jews and Natives in his poem, *The Game Between the Jews and the Indians Is Tied Going Into the Bottom of the Ninth Inning*, associating these two peoples struggle to one of survival and perseverance (Alexie, 80).
- <sup>6</sup> In my painting, *Bed's are for Winners*, 2015, I spelled the name of Alfred Wegener wrong.

- 
- <sup>7</sup> The expression (as by speaking or writing) of the content of consciousness without censorship as an aid in gaining access to unconscious processes especially in psychoanalysis (Merriam Webster).
- <sup>8</sup> The tradition being that most First Nations cultures have a special connotation attached to the length of ones hair, I have although misremembered this tradition, and remembered it as braiding. And the biological constrain being my Scottish hair curls opposed to growing down.

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