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Body, Mind, and Archives: A Critical Questioning of “Places for Knowledge” in David Treuer’s The Translation of Dr. Apelles

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Body, Mind, and Archives: A Critical Questioning of "Places for Knowledge" in David Treuer's *The Translation of Dr. Apelles*

The Western project of colonialism has implemented different forms of oppression in Turtle Island ever since the first European settlers arrived. Binaries, such as *savage/civilized* or *oral/written*, were quickly created and sustained by the Western mindset, which resulted in a hierarchization that empowered Euro-Americans while oppressing Indigenous peoples. "Indians" were sealed in the past as myths and turned into marketable products (Vizenor 1994; King 2008, 2013). Indigenous literary study has been influenced by this process. Western theories have been applied to analyze and understand Indigenous texts, which I consider a practice of colonialism, as Indigenous texts were "framed in and read from a western perspective" (Blaeser 69). As a result, misconceptions about the actual plurality of Indigenous cultures, languages, and literatures both written and oral were solidified. Rooted in the written word, Western hierarchies of knowledge have thus allowed Euro-American society to retain dominance over Indigenous peoples. In order to break with such politics, norms and practices, novels such as Ojibwe scholar David Treuer's *The Translation of Dr. Apelles* (2006) ask the reader to contend with not knowing/understanding everything. Treuer argues that because of the normalized hierarchical Western understanding of "places for knowledge" (libraries/archives), Native Americans and their cultures were never considered part of Western reality. While Treuer's novel has already been scrutinized from "within" (Yost 2010; Freiert 2013; Eils 2014), there is still room to build on a close investigation concerning what Yost calls the "interplay between stories and lived experience" (67) as it relates to "knowledge" and the "places" where it can (supposedly) be found. More specifically, I seek to provide a deeper understanding of "repositories for knowledge" that do not support Euro-American hierarchies of knowledge. My paper thus asks: How can literary study more meaningfully help to obliterate hierarchical Western conceptualizations of knowledge that isolate Indigenous peoples and seal them into the past?

In order to find an answer to this question, I engage with Treuer's fictional novel by following in the wake of Maracle (1992), Blaeser (1993), Vizenor (1994), Treuer (2002), King (2008; 2013), Yost (2010), Freiert (2013), and Eils (2014), who have all sought to illustrate how meaning as well as theory can be found within a primary text. To emphasize the importance of my three main arguments, I have organized this paper into three sections. Treuer's novel neatly exemplifies how 1) Euro-American conceptualizations of knowledge and literary criticism need to be revisited in order to become more ethical, 2) Euro-American repositories for knowledge cannot capture Indigenous cultures and literatures, and 3) Indigenous cultures and literatures can neither be fully understood nor owned

by Euro-American settler-colonialism, but they can be recognized and appreciated for their individual natures, without Euro-American strictures and with an ethical understanding of Euro-American limitations. The first section helps to identify the acuteness of the problem addressed in this essay. It elucidates what repositories for knowledge are usually envisioned as within the Euro-American society and shows why a reconceptualization of (places for) knowledge is needed. The second section focuses on descriptions of the *library* as well as the *archive* in the novel, exemplified through RECAP. In the third section, I closely scrutinize the *body* as a place for knowledge, using the example of Campaspe's apartment and her personal development over the course of the novel. Both the second and the third section critically analyze selected excerpts of *The Translation of Dr. Apelles* through close reading and working from within the text. It is especially with the second and the third section that I seek to better represent alternative conceptualizations of "(places for) knowledge," which are not hierarchical, by implementing the concept of *cultural competence* as one of my tools of analysis for close reading (Hanson 243). Gaye Hanson defines the term *cultural competence* as "a human relational capacity to seek and find compassionate understanding within, between, and among people of differing cultural backgrounds and perspectives" (238). I briefly refer back to her thoughts, as they help to highlight how a compassionate understanding can be found *within* people of different cultural backgrounds (Hanson 238). Ultimately, my goal is to show that reshaping the concept of "places for knowledge" poses very real consequences for decolonization within literary study, as it will help to obliterate the made-up myth of the "Indian" (Vizenor 4-6, 14; Madsen 34) or the "Dead Indian" (King 2013: 54).

On the Conceptualization of Knowledge and Repositories for Knowledge

Euro-American conceptualizations of knowledge traditionally revolve around the idea that specific words can transport knowledge, while others cannot. Words written up as theory are thus oftentimes thought to provide knowledge, unlike fiction, which is usually said to not transport knowledge. From this perspective, analyzing fiction, or any text, within the Euro-American culture hence only works with theory, since theory is said to investigate claims and prove them right or wrong. Within this mindset, theory can be proven by demonstrable arguments, as Lee Maracle outlines in her essay "Oratory: Coming to Theory" (62). However, Maracle cautions that "[w]ords are not objects to be wasted. They [in themselves] represent the accumulated knowledge, cultural values, the vision of an entire people or peoples" (62). According to this approach, story or fiction can represent knowledge in the same way as non-fiction texts, if not even better. The "alienated notion [among European scholars] which maintains that theory is separate from story," as Maracle puts it, appears to be nothing else but a Eurocentric way of

staying in control of the conceptualization and understanding of knowledge. The politics and norms of requiring “a different set of words … to ‘prove’ an idea [rather] than [being able to simply] ‘show’ one” can thus be seen as a form of colonization that values Euro-American traditions and devalues Indigenous literatures and cultures, as the Indigenous Canadian writer and academic explains (62). In order to change this mindset, Maracle proposes a different way of conceptualizing knowledge. She suggests that “believ[ing] the proof of a thing or idea is in the doing. Doing requires some form of social interaction and thus, *story* is the most persuasive and sensible way to present the accumulated thoughts and values of a people” (62). While I concede that story is a persuasive and sensible way of presenting the thoughts and values of a people – which I understand as a form of knowledge – I disagree with Maracle insofar as I would not discard Euro-American theory as less persuasive than stories in every instance. Other Indigenous scholars, such as Kimberly Blaeser, have also argued that one can make valuable use of both story and Eurocentric theory, as long as it is done in an ethical way (68). In order to meaningfully and ethically engage with Indigenous texts, both Euro-American and Indigenous scholars must value story/fiction just as much as non-fiction (Blaeser 68-71). To further this goal, it would help to reconceptualize places for knowledge.

When thinking about *valid* resources for knowledge, having a set physical place in mind that functions as a repository for written texts has shaped Western understandings of the world to the point where non-conforming forms of knowledge, such as Indigenous literatures (especially in oral forms), are often considered to be mere myths of the past that are, at best, bankable (Vizenor 1994; King 2008, 2013). In “Too Heavy to Lift,” Thomas King showcases this especially well when he refers to what he calls the “Dead Indian,” a biased and stereotypical imagination of what Euro-Americans thought Indigenous communities and their cultures to be (2013: 54). Something that never existed could not be threatening to Euro-Americans. Moreover, it could serve as “the only antiquity that North America ha[d],” and thus sell as such, as King outlines in his work (2013: 54-5). It is particularly in this third chapter to his book *The Inconvenient Indian: A Curious Account of Native People in North America,* that King lists products that Euro-Americans, or “whites,” as he refers to them, created and sold as seemingly authentic Indian goods, such as “Red Man Tobacco,” or “Big Chief Jerky,” which, of course, had nothing to do with Indigenous cultures, but sold better carrying the invented branding (2013: 55-7). Myths about Indigenous traditions and cultures were thus created, used, and abused. The misappropriation did not stop at the economic level, but also translated into other realms, such as literature and culture. Euro-American myths about Indigenous cultures are hence at the core of the construction of knowledge that sealed, and still seals, Indigenous peoples in the past. As a consequence of this constructed

imbalance, Western theories, canonical works, and Western literary criticism have also almost exclusively shaped the field of literary studies within Western society. However, concerning Indigenous literary studies, this modus operandi is not necessarily adequate or the most ethical approach (Maracle 1992; Blaeser 1993). Just like the body can be seen as the vessel for oral literature and storytelling, a more ethical while still critical investigation of Indigenous literatures can come from within the text itself (Maracle 1992). As this approach still needs to gain greater acceptance within Indigenous literary studies, my work seeks to dismantle the politics of Western libraries/archives from within Treuer's text.

Libraries and Archives

It is at such a library that Apelles works on his translation. One day, Ms. Fabian, the reading-room librarian, asks him whether he has found everything he needed. Apelles affirms, but states that he is not satisfied with what he has found. This seems to throw the librarian off, since she is convinced that people come "here [to the library] for knowledge" (Treuer 2006: 32). Apelles negates this thought and says that "I and everyone else come for evidence…out of our desire for it" (Treuer 2006: 32). The Euro-American Ms. Fabian does not understand where this desire stems from. Apelles has no answer to that question. Later in the book, there is a similar conversation between the two characters:

> '[K]nowledge, you must admit, is the reason these archives exist. You simply must come here for knowledge, my poor Doctor, it's certainly not for the air, which is bad. It's not healthy, it can't be!'
> 'No, no, no,' said Dr. Apelles, rocking back on his heels and heaving his shoulders with mirth, 'I do not come here for the air. But, my dear Ms Fabian, knowledge is not to be found here. It can't be. Knowledge is never found, of course, it is created.' (Treuer 2006: 53)

Ms. Fabian does not object to this last statement. However, she does wonder how knowledge is created. While Apelles does not provide her with an answer, he does identify this to be the problem. At the end of the novel, there is no final answer to the question of where to find knowledge, but there is a hint at how it can be created. "[Y]ou didn't find anything in the archive, did you," asks Campaspe towards the end of the novel. Apelles, answering "with a twinkle in his eye," says "I found myself" (Treuer 2006: 312), which seems rather ambiguous. Earlier passages of the novel suggest that Apelles did not consult any of the books at the archive. Therefore, one could think that it is simply the building that provided this new awareness in Apelles. However, RECAP is also described to be located among "suburban ruins" (Treuer 2006: 314). The following lines reinforce this notion. "This must be what it is like to die," reflects Apelles, while mentally

browsing through the buildings and places that were part of the time he was working on the translation. Previously in the book, RECAP is depicted as "a final resting place" (Treuer 2006: 70), and a place in which it is easy to "get lost forever" in (Treuer 2006: 71). The archive itself thus seems devoid of life, of all cultural functions that would be of greater value.

Although devoid of life, it offers something else: order. The strictures of RECAP are described to make Campaspe feel comforted: "They [the strictures] provided order and there was a kind of beauty in that order" (Treuer 2006: 141). The words *kind of* might suggest that Campaspe is not quite sure whether RECAP's strict order really is beautiful. However, what appears to be sure is that she has respect for the place, since "[s]he had never stolen a book from RECAP, had never so much as cracked a spine to peek inside" (Treuer 2006: 142). Whether this is due to the neatly ordered stacks or whether it is due to Ms. Manger, who "resembled not so much a visionary manager of a state-of-the-art library as the head housekeeper in a Victorian mansion," is not entirely clear (Treuer 2006: 142). Once more, it is the usage of certain words, such as Ms. Manger's name itself – *manger* being the French verb for *to eat* – or the following rather archaic term *demesne* that suggests a Eurocentric mindset at work at RECAP. Even Ms. Manger's character, that is her hunger for control, is described in terms of a Eurocentric understanding of power via possession: "That Ms. Manger did not own any of the demesne somehow heightened her need for control" (Treuer 2006: 142). The fact that RECAP cannot be owned by a Euro-American librarian, Ms. Manger, could be suggestive of the limits of Euro-American power and control. In this sense, RECAP can be read as a repository for knowledge that, despite its Euro-American fabric and strictures, cannot be owned, at least not in its entirety. Going one step further, this could point to the fact that Euro-American strictures, no matter how heavily enforced, cannot completely control Indigenous cultures and literatures. However, it is interesting that it takes a Euro-American character, Campaspe, to render both the Eurocentric power dynamics at RECAP as well as the library/archive itself irrelevant for Apelles:

> He would look back down at his workstation and instead of the books in RECAP he saw the translation. Likewise, if he was at the archive, and the papers were actually before him, he saw not the words or their meaning but gestures of Campaspe's that he had seen and collected at work. (Treuer 2006: 145)

Aside from the translation, it is thus not the library/archive that captures Apelles, but the Euro-American woman and her bodily movements. Despite the magical influence she has on him, Campaspe's thoughts of Apelles also make the critical reader cringe at times. Seeing Apelles "through the camera of her eyes" (Treuer

2006: 144) or the description that "Campaspe couldn't help thinking that he [Apelles] was like some kind of animal" (Treuer 2006: 144) seem to fit a settler-colonial way of talking about Indigenous peoples. We could ask ourselves whether these instances hint at simulations of Apelles, as he appears in a Euro-American setting, which is the library/archive. Campaspe continues to imagine him "[like] a badger or a woodchuck or a beaver – who needs nothing else, who need not to do anything in particular at all for us to recognize him, instantly, for what he is" (Treuer 2006: 144). Hanson cautions that "problems between cultural groups worsen when one group sees the other as less than a full and equal member of the human race" (243). Subsequently, the question arises whether this is an instance of Campaspe belittling Apelles, when she does not even know who he really is. The supposition seems to be justified, as her view of him only changes after having started an intimate relationship with him outside of RECAP (Treuer 2006: 144-5). In the end, Campaspe could be seen as a Euro-American individual who starts out behaving in settler-colonial ways, as she tries to possess Apelles and also steals his translation from him, but who ends up seeing Apelles from within – physically as well as spiritually. In the following section, I will show how Campaspe bridges the Euro-American world of the library/archive and the Indigenous world of the body as a vessel for knowledge.

The Body as a Vessel for Knowledge

Campaspe "long[s] to lift his [Apelles's] cover and read him, to bring him home [into her apartment] and read him immediately and completely, and ultimately, to shelve him in her most private and intimate stacks in her warm, cozy, red-hued apartment" (Treuer 2006: 144). With this graphic description, resembling sexually motivated bodily wishes more than the wish of getting to know someone, one could ask whether this is, in fact, the fierce foreshadowing of an act of appropriation. Moreover, the ambiguous ways in which Campaspe's apartment is written up make it seem as if, in fact, her living body – one that is craving more (textual and physical) knowledge – is described from the inside. In an earlier section, it is illustrated as follows:

> Campaspe's apartment was small, a studio, and even though it could be considered cramped, it was very homey. The whole of it – the single room containing the kitchen, the living space, and her bed, which was set under the window – was painted a warm rusty red. Neat shelves of books grew as quickly and healthily as the few potted plants set around the place. The shelves began at the door, walked along the long wall, skipped over the doorway to the bathroom, made a turn at the corner, kept running their hands along the wall facing the street, skipped over the window, paused around the bed, skipped the other half of the large window, reached the

> other corner, turned right and ran, unbroken, to the edge of the kitchen area, took a deep breath and dove under the opening to the kitchen, and reemerged to make the last few steps back to the front door. (140)

There are several things to be spotted in this section about Campaspe's "living space" (Treuer 2006: 140). First of all, it is remarkable how verbs are being used in relation to "the shelves." Usually, shelves are stationary. However, Campaspe's shelves quite literally come to life, thanks to the verbs that are used to describe them: *walk, skip, make a turn, run one's hands along something, reach something, run, take a deep breath, dive,* and *reemerge* are all verbs of movement. The liveliness of Campaspe's shelves of books, which hold the physical equivalent to what she has already absorbed in her mind, is emphasized here. Moreover, the color of her apartment, "a warm rusty red" (Treuer 2006: 144), seems reminiscent of the inner layers of the body. In relation to the pause around the bed and her desire for Apelles, this could even be hinting at the primary sexual organs of a female body, though the most important conclusion to be drawn from this description is that Campaspe's body and mind appear to be one. A possible cultural function of this "place for knowledge" might thus be the suggestion that the body and the mind are inseparable and that they can both hold knowledge. Moreover, without signaling voice (Kennedy 2008; Kirwan 2009), Treuer seems to write up Campaspe's way of perceiving and treating Apelles in a way that mirrors and critiques acts of colonization, such as turning Indigenous peoples into graspable objects (King 2008; 2013). The fact that she steals Apelles's translation might hint at the fact that Euro-Americans cannot content themselves with a mere Indigenous presence. They have to have it "translated" into their own cultural framework, which is more "cozy" to them (Treuer 2006: 144). It is when seen in this context of exploitation and appropriation of Native translators' work that "Apelles's [recurrent] insistence on the fictionality of his story and his [also recurrent] recognition of readers' participation in the novel" become highly political, as Colleen G. Eils points out in her essay (2014). An act of appropriation is thus also a possible interpretation of Campaspe's behavior, since we learn that she likes to steal books she cannot afford, simply because she is "curious" (Treuer 2006: 140). Although she mostly steals from "bookstores" and "public libraries" (Treuer 2006: 140), and although the stolen books remain "symbols of her poverty and her curiosity" (Treuer 2006: 140), the question lingers as to why she does not wait to get Apelles's permission to read his manuscript.

Ultimately, the reader learns that the words Apelles has been inaudibly uttering while staring into his window were "I love you" (Treuer 2006: 315). In "An Ojibwe *Daphnis and Chloe*: David Treuer's *The Translation of Dr. Apelles*," William K. Freiert elucidates this last section of the novel best when he links it to Indigenous healing and reclaiming agency: "In learning to read Campaspe, Dr.

Apelles learns to transcend the Euro-American stereotype of the Native American, to love himself, and to tell his own story, which is to love" (64-5). Likewise, it is in relating Apelles's story that Treuer achieves his goal of presenting Native American literature that is not about history, but about life. Neither Apelles nor his story are hollow "Native Informants" (Treuer 2002: 55). With Campaspe's example, the reader is introduced to a degree of cultural competence that helps to obliterate Western hierarchies by transcending traditional Euro-American places for knowledge while (quite literally) letting oneself in for a body – as well as the knowledge it carries – instead. While the library and RECAP, the Euro-American modelled places for knowledge, are no longer of importance, the translation itself seems to have lost part of its value as well when it is finally shelved. The "manuscript sleeps in its box…unloved and loved" (Treuer 2006: 314). Unloved, maybe because Apelles does not bother to look inside (Treuer 2006: 314), or maybe because most people will never read or miss it. Loved, maybe because "[Apelles] has no need to see because he already sees. He knows what is written there, and so do you" (Treuer 2006: 314). In other words, the translation is cherished by a few individuals, including perhaps some of the readers; but most of all, it has fulfilled its main purpose of Apelles being able to love Campaspe as well as himself.

In the end, the many ways in which libraries are written up in Treuer's *Apelles* require further investigation. With special attention to other characters, such as Jesus or Ms. Manger, the dynamics at work at traditional Euro-American places for knowledge could be further elucidated. Parallels to conceptualizations of knowledge within the story of Eta and Bimaadiz seem fruitful as well, since they also work around the body as the most crucial vessel for knowledge. In terms of creating knowledge, a critical scrutinization of Treuer's writing style as compared to his rejection of precursory Indigenous literary study seems to constitute a promising object of research, as Virginia Kennedy (2008) and Padraig Kirwan (2009) have shown in their interviews with the novelist.

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