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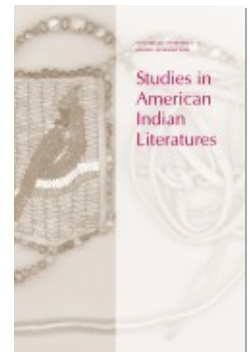
Surviving Catastrophe: Traveling with Coyote in *Bad Indians*:  
*A Tribal Memoir*

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# Surviving Catastrophe

Traveling with Coyote in *Bad Indians: A Tribal Memoir*

LYDIA M. HEBERLING

In her formally compelling and complex book, *Bad Indians: A Tribal Memoir* (2013), Esselen and Chumash writer Deborah Miranda negotiates centuries of violent colonial entanglements in the space we now know as California and reimagines dominant narratives of California Indian erasure to assert their (and her) survival. This work is daunting: California histories refuse easy consumption, and thus the forms and storytelling modes required to map the landscape of colonial aftermath, as well as Indigenous resurgence, are varied and shifting. As readers entering into this kind of formal, historical, and emotional complexity, it can be helpful to have a guide. One possible way to navigate *Bad Indians* is to follow one of the figures who recurs throughout it: Coyote. This essay asks: what happens when we follow Coyote through the book? What might Coyote have to teach us? What can we learn about Miranda's project by noticing how Coyote moves, plays, and creates pathways through the book? What does he make visible that was invisible before attending to him? Understanding the creation story of the Esselen world and Coyote as one of the Creators helps.

*At the beginning of the world, a catastrophic flood caused the Costanoan Ohlone First Beings—Eagle, Coyote, and Hummingbird—to flee their homelands in what is now known as Monterey, California and seek sanctuary on a nearby mountain peak to wait for the waters to recede. After a time, Eagle sent Coyote down to see whether it was safe to return home. Coyote returned to inform Eagle and Hummingbird that the waters had receded and that it was safe to return home. In gratitude for the risk Coyote took to investigate their homelands, Eagle gave Coyote a wife and*

*instructed him to begin the crucial work of raising the people back up again.*

Shared with University of California, Berkeley anthropologist Alfred Kroeber in 1907 by two Carmel Mission women, Jacinta Gonzalez and Maria Viviana Soto, this creation narrative is a remarkable story of “rebirth and regeneration, one that recounts how the First People were brought to the brink of destruction yet survived to re-people their land” (Hackel 16). Collectively, the Coyote stories gathered by Kroeber construct a fragmented creation narrative about both hardship and regeneration for the Carmel Mission peoples, a story of “setbacks, false starts, doubts, and departures, all on the way to recovery” (Hackel 16). As Gonzalez and Soto share, Coyote’s five children became the founders of the five Costanoan tribes in the Monterey region, one of which is the federally-recognized Ohlone-Costanoan Esselen tribe to which Miranda belongs.

Like the origin story, Miranda’s 2013 innovative mixed-media, mixed-genre memoir centers catastrophe as a central event. That is, the “twin evils” of colonization in California: Spanish Missionization and the subsequent California Gold Rush that brings her people to the brink of destruction (Miranda, *Indian Cartography* ix). When the Spanish arrived in what is now California in 1769 and established twenty-one missions along the Pacific coast between San Diego and San Francisco, the world as coastal California Indian communities knew it ended, submerged in the first of what would become multiple waves of violent settler colonialism between 1769 and 1848 and their enduring effects through time. As California mission historian Steven Hackel explains, “Unlike the ocean’s waters, whose gradual ascent in the Early Period had afforded the Indians of Monterey an incremental adaptation over generations, these agents of change flooded in, often unseen, if not wholly unanticipated, and so brought the Children of Coyote to the brink of destruction” (26). Settler notions of progress, education, and civilization disrupted traditional ways of living, dislocated hundreds of thousands from their homes, and enforced new forms of religious worship under penalty of punishment. Settler colonial structures in California were designed with one purpose in mind: the total eradication of California’s Indigenous peoples. And in just under one hundred years they nearly succeeded. California’s Native population fell from over 150,000 to barely 15,000 by the end of the nineteenth century.

And yet once more, like the creation story, the world in *Bad Indians* does not end following catastrophe. As the story goes, many like Coyote risked their lives to ensure that the people would survive and rise back up. In *Bad Indians* these figures are the Indians who transgressed colonial law and order; who evaded punishment, missionization, and murderous vigilante hunting groups in order to survive; who fought to maintain cultural traditions and knowledges; and who innovated to ensure that important stories were safely encoded in settler and other archives for future generations. In other words, they were “bad Indians,” simultaneously contradicting popular sentiment that “the only good Indians are dead”<sup>1</sup> and refusing to conform to tropes of Indianness that underwrote/write the justification of settler occupation of Native lands.<sup>2</sup> Later and elsewhere, Miranda calls these “bad Indians” mission- and post-mission era Coyotes (“They Were Tough” 377), a compelling refiguration that recuperates narrative control of these transgressive figures and restores them to tribally-specific frameworks that affirm their role as important agents of social instruction.

One question that arises is *who* exactly is Coyote in *Bad Indians*? The answer is as complex as the figure of Coyote itself: there are many. As the storyteller who pieces together the narrative fragments in order to make a new world, Miranda is herself a kind of Coyote figure, both trickster and cultural hero. The other featured storytellers who appear in the book are also represented as both Coyote and storyteller: Esselen informant Isabel Meadows and the Smithsonian ethnographer, J. P. Harrington. Miranda situates herself in a storytelling genealogy with both figures because Meadows is her relative and because she takes up Harrington’s work of collecting culturally resurgent narratives. The previously mentioned “bad Indians” who defy the edicts of colonizers trying to assimilate or eradicate them, whose stories she tells, are also Coyotes. There are fifteen different narrative fragments of various lengths and fullness throughout the book that detail evidence of these bad Indians. Lastly, Coyote himself appears in the book: once in the inclusion of one of Acjachamen and Tongva artist L. Frank’s famous Coyote comics, titled “California Pow Wow,” and once in the short story, “Coyote Takes a Trip,” which Miranda wrote and originally published in *Sovereign Erotics: A Collection of Two-Spirit Literature* (2011). As we will see, these multiple Coyotes overlap, bump up against, and trip over each other throughout the book, raising questions such as: how

do the contradictory actions of Coyote support world-building? How do Coyote's shape-shifting capacities and transgressive actions defy elimination while instructing the community how to survive?

To complicate things further, the figure of Coyote in *Bad Indians* is not simply the common figure found across Turtle Island storytelling traditions. More than the common trickster figure who appears in tribal literatures across Turtle Island, Coyote is a tribally-specific First Being and Creator grounded in creation narratives and traditions. Certainly he embodies the qualities of “stamina, curiosity, and malleability” identified in studies about the common Coyote trope.<sup>3</sup> He is “continually changing, growing, moving, returning, always adding new meaning and making new things possible” and he represents the “unfailing and indomitable creative spirit of his storytellers” (Schöler 9–10).

The problem with universalizing Coyote as a trickster archetype, according to Hupa and Yurok scholar Cutcha Risling Baldy, however, is that such a portrayal

renders these stories as metaphor. They are translated and consequently mis-translated as animal stories about the trickster subconscious. This universalizing of Coyote First Person separates Coyote First Person from his/her people and his/her land and erases an important intent of Coyote's stories—to establish an everlasting connection and responsibility to the land and its inhabitants. (“Coyote is Not a Metaphor” 16)

By making the important distinction between Coyote as a literary trope and Coyote First Person as a tribally-contextualized Being, Risling Baldy argues that “Coyote First Person is not only a trickster, but also a complex embodiment of Indigenous decolonizing methodologies” (2). Here Risling Baldy draws from the seminal work *Decolonizing Methodologies* by Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith to argue for the inclusion of Indigenous ways of knowing—including Coyote stories—as legitimate methods of critical analysis.<sup>4</sup> In *Bad Indians*, Coyote stories affirm tribally-specific and grounded ways of reimagining the pernicious effects of colonialism.

I argue that the Coyote from the previously reproduced creation story is the same First Being figure who also appears in *Bad Indians*, and that reading Coyote this way situates *Bad Indians* in a narrative genealogy that extends backward to the creation story while it imag-

ines forward toward vibrant Indigenous futures. This method of reading transforms Miranda's innovative act of storytelling into what I call a decolonial storytelling praxis that reveals continuous narrative connections to the beginning of time and refuses the pernicious physical and cultural erasure of California Indians.<sup>5</sup> *Bad Indians* is a creation story in that it reimagines the original story of the Esselen people and relies on the resilient work of Coyote as a model for surviving the catastrophe of colonialism. The energy of continuity and survivance embedded in the image of Coyote's fluid and often transgressive movements across the book unsettles colonial formations of identity and temporality that figure California Indians as dead and gone. Just as in the creation story, in *Bad Indians* Coyote is busy at work raising the people back up. But Coyote also reimagines the California story as he moves between the interstitial spaces of Miranda's narrative fragments, remaking the world.

Scholarly responses to *Bad Indians* underscore the ways in which Miranda's innovative text advances current conversations about Indigenous genres, archives, aesthetics, material cultures, and temporalities.<sup>6</sup> My work with *Bad Indians* is part of a larger project to amplify the rich archive of creative and literary production in California Native literatures and arts.

#### FORMAL AND TEMPORAL TRANSGRESSIONS: THE INNOVATIVENESS OF *BAD INDIANS*

Miranda constructs her memoir like a "mosaic," recuperating and repurposing narrative fragments that testify to those "bad Indian" stories in order to ensure cultural survival. Drawing from personal and public archives, she transforms the profound cultural rupture caused by Spanish missionization into a provocative, lively, and polyvocal testimony of survivance<sup>7</sup>—the repurposed narrative fragments bear witness to the "bad Indians" who refused to comply with the edicts of the Spanish friars and soldiers, and all of their unlikely descendants. Of the mosaic form she writes, "Sometimes something is so badly broken you cannot recreate its original shape at all. If you try, you create a deformed, imperfect image of what you've lost . . . more useful and beautiful results can come from using the pieces to construct a mosaic" (135). The uniqueness of the mosaic as a literary form affirms that "Matter cannot be created or destroyed, only transformed" and that

using the narrative fragments honors and does justice to the integrity of the stories (135). Miranda is an incredible provocateur: she plays upon the dominant presumption that “all those California Indians are gone!” (*Indian Cartography* ix) and invites readers into a contradictorily rich storied world of Native California in order to assert that not only have California Indians survived supposed cultural and physical genocide, they are carrying on in increasing abundance. Certainly, she testifies to the precariousness of survival. But Miranda refuses the persistent narrative of erasure and disappearance perpetuated about California Indians: rather, she overwhelms readers with diverse, complex, and even contradictory Native voices that clamor out of the archives and onto the page, bursting to be heard after such a long-imposed silence. On one hand Miranda’s project is compellingly simple: in raising the voices of silenced ancestors she affirms to her readers and to herself that Native Californians are *still alive* and *still here*. On the other, the formal complexity of her innovative text and her transformation of “bad Indian” stories into Coyote stories grounds her storytelling praxis in tribally-specific knowledge that continues to inform and instruct contemporary Esselen, California, and Native as well as non-Native peoples. This is California Indian survivance in all its literary glory.

Using what non-Native literary scholar Lisa Tatonetti calls a practice of Indigenous assemblage in the “construction” of *Bad Indians*, Miranda juxtaposes archival print, visual, and audio media alongside her own poetry and lyric essays to create her mosaic.<sup>8</sup> This mosaic in turn intervenes in the “institutional fantasy” of Mission Mythology so strongly supported in public education, and imagines a new Indigenous-centered figuration of California’s history as well as the present and future. Miranda’s creative temporalizing of the four major sections of her book dislocate chronological anchors used commonly in settler historical narratives and reframe California history through her family’s stories. *Bad Indians* is comprised of four sections that move chronologically from eighteenth-century Spanish contact to the present and cover four broad periods of California Indian history. Although the framing sections move chronologically, the internal structure of each section unsettles linear understandings of time, what non-Native literary scholar Mark Rifkin calls “settler time.”<sup>9</sup> Both Miranda’s broader temporal frames and their internal narratives exemplify Miranda’s method of actively but not easily engaging her readers in re-creating

a Native California world. And this is hard work, both in the sense of difficulty identifying how seemingly unmatching narrative fragments fit together and also in asking readers to enter into such violent and unfamiliar histories to re-create them with her. Miranda engages her readers in active participation in making sense out of the fragments by refusing to resolve the jagged transitions between stories and media. Like the process of making a mosaic, she believes that piecing the fragments together will—and should—make your hands bleed (135).

Crucially, Coyote's appearances in *Bad Indians* model how we might enter into this complex process. The relationship between bad Indian stories, other narrative fragments, and Coyote stories is fundamental to the form of *Bad Indians* and to Miranda's compelling praxis of storytelling as instruction and survival. Coyote travels between the narrative fragments and transgresses chronologies. He appears in both Esselen stories and Chumash territory and bridges the shared effects of colonialism in California. Following him renders the often not-apparent passageways between stories—the story bridges built on the backs of her ancestors—visible. In the remaining portion of this essay, I offer readings of three moments when Coyote explicitly appears in *Bad Indians* as evocative examples of how Coyote facilitates Miranda's re-worlding process. In these three readings, Coyote appears in the archives, in comics, and in Venice Beach. United under the larger rubric of storytelling and decolonial praxis, and supported by Miranda's mixed-media textual strategies, Coyote and Miranda collaborate to reenact the creation story and raise up the people.

“J. P. HARRINGTON: A COLLAGE”:

COYOTE UNSETTLES THE ARCHIVES

Coyote explicitly appears for the first time in the piece “J. P. Harrington: A Collage,” in the guise of elusive and highly sought-after Coyote stories. “A Collage” appears at the end of the third section of the book, “The Light from Carissa Plains,” a section which collects and reproduces stories told by her grandfather, Tom Miranda, previously recorded on cassette tapes. The inclusion of this (re)collection continues Miranda's project to restore narrative agency to Native voices. “A Collage,” at the conclusion of this collection of stories, utilizes the formal structure of the collage and the integration of Coyote stories to unsettle the



goals of salvage anthropology. It does this by provoking tension in the relationship between ethnologist, informant, and the genre of the field note. Throughout *Bad Indians* Miranda repeatedly addresses the ethnographic pursuit of Coyote stories by prominent California ethnographers such as J. P. Harrington, a Smithsonian ethnologist who worked closely with Isabel Meadows and the Esselen tribe in the early twentieth century, and whose field notes, along with Alfred Kroeber's, contain a lot of the information Miranda draws from in her construction of *Bad Indians* (28, 61, 104). As Risling Baldy has argued,

In the early twentieth century, following some of the most violent periods of colonial history, many anthropologists, archaeologists, linguists, and other scholars became interested in documenting Indian life to preserve what they perceived as a 'dying culture.' This phenomenon of salvage ethnography implied that Native cultures had been static before contact, and therefore once pristine, untouched Indian society would have no ability to survive the continuing intrusion of Western culture. (*We Are Dancing* 5)

Harrington was one such researcher, a man known to be so compulsive in collecting remnants of disappearing cultures that Miranda recounts that he would, if prompted, "write down the Indian directions for scratching your ass" (23). While humorous, this glib joke at Harrington's expense underscores salvage ethnographers' obsessive impulses to *collect, collect, collect* cultural knowledge: *What* knowledge they collected or the ways in which that knowledge was often mis-contextualized was less important to the ethnographer.

"J. P. Harrington: A Collage" demonstrates the flexibility of the archives, configuring them literally into a new form while also blending colonizers' and colonized voices together in an evocative demonstration that to make a new story it takes all of the storytellers to do so.<sup>10</sup> "A Collage" is composed of fifteen text boxes that contain extracts from ethnographic field notes that affirm three common tropes of salvage ethnography: the imminent disappearance of Indigenous peoples and cultures, the collection of material culture decontextualized from its cultural context, and the necessity to understand Coyote stories as representative of important cultural pedagogy. Much like reading a comic narrative, the fragmented field notes and juxtaposed narrative wisps invite readers into active, participatory meaning-making in order

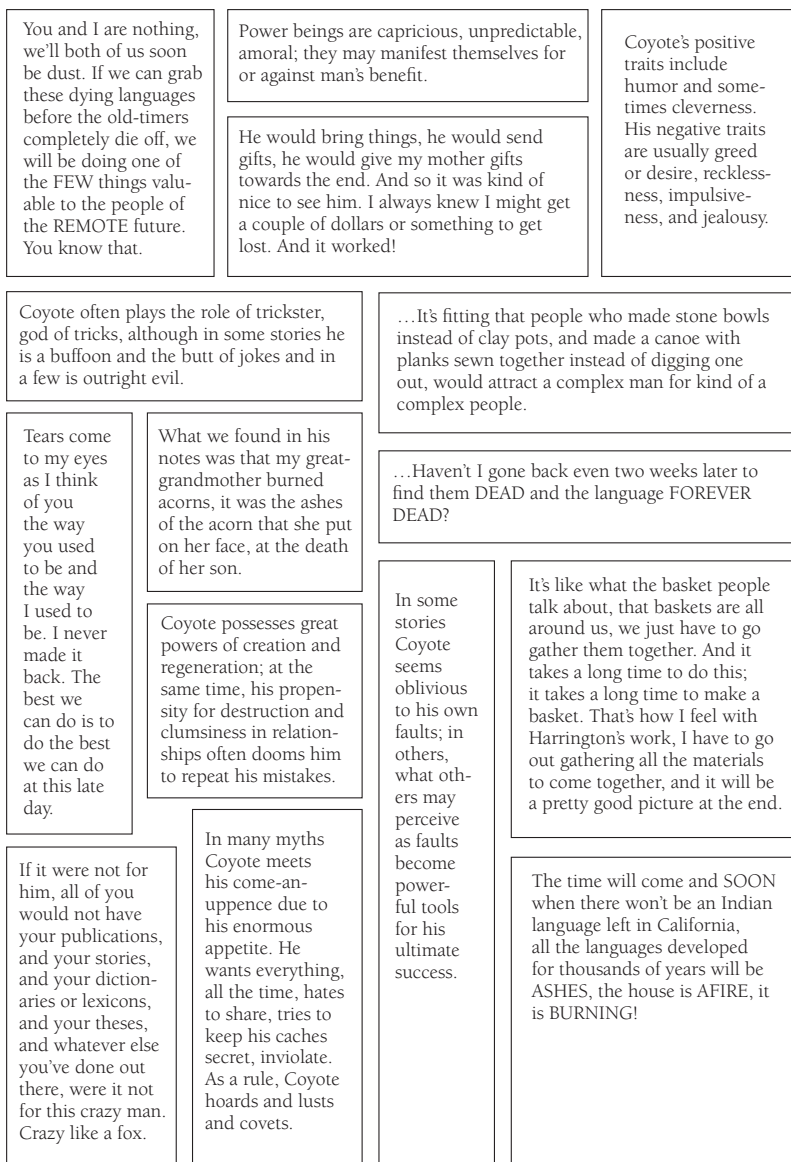


Fig. 1. "J. P. Harrington: A Collage" from *Bad Indians: A Tribal Memoir*. Reproduced with permission of Heyday Press.

to connect the stories. On one hand, readers can choose what route to take through and across the text boxes, tracking for example only the five interspersed fragments that describe the figure of Coyote. To read only the five fragments about Coyote and leave the rest would construct a decontextualized Coyote figure with positive traits like “humor and sometimes cleverness” as well as negative traits such as “greed or desire, recklessness, impulsiveness, and jealousy”; one who “often plays the role of trickster, god of tricks” and sometimes “a buffoon and the butt of jokes and in a few is outright evil” (104). Reading in this pattern reproduces the act of collecting Coyote stories and renders a generalized Coyote figure easily transformed into a metaphor or folk tale. Reading in this pattern also reproduces the act of “cherry picking” stories of interest that disregard their complex and embedded relationship to other aspects of material and human culture. In other words, selectively choosing which stories you “collect” reduces their power to accurately represent the whole picture.

On the other hand, reading the collage in its entirety following typical reading practices of reading left to right, top to bottom, creates a complexly interwoven narrative about cultural loss, material culture, and Coyote stories that move rapidly between foci and unsettle the referent of the narrative wisps. One effect of reading in a “traditional” manner is that it becomes difficult to discern whether the ambiguous pronoun “he” refers to the figure of the ethnographer or to Coyote. The statement “Power beings are capricious, unpredictable, amoral; they may manifest themselves for or against man’s benefit” for example can transform into a double meaning in which “power beings” might refer to either creation figures such as Coyote or to ethnographers such as Harrington (104). Within the discrete text boxes it is clear who the “he” or “power being” is; but when we read *across* the boxes the repetition of “he” and the constant switching of the referent creates ambiguity and uncertainty. The primary effect of this is that Harrington’s authoritative position as the ethnographer becomes unsettled as he is conflated with the Coyote figure who is “oblivious to his own faults,” whose “propensity for destruction and clumsiness in relationships often dooms him to repeat his mistakes” and so on. The salvage ethnographic narrative, for decades the primary narrative *about* Native peoples in California, effectively loses its singular authority and restores narrative agency to storytellers such as Meadows and Miranda.

A secondary effect of the collage form is that it reverses the anthropological gaze and positions Harrington as the object of analysis. While “A Collage” effectively unsettles the authoritative position of Harrington and blurs the distinction between him and Coyote, the page following “A Collage,” an imagined obituary for Harrington, further cements this reading. Miranda includes this obituary as a final reflection on Harrington from the perspective of the Esselen. She writes, “They called you by so many names. Glutton. Savior, cheat, outlaw. Clown. Creator. Pragmatist,” each term directly invoking the idea of Coyote as both trickster and the butt of jokes described in “A Collage” on the previous page. Miranda assumes the position of storyteller held by Harrington and repositions Harrington as a complicated figure in Esselen history, one about which she and her people have formed varied opinions. She then directly addresses Harrington: “Could you even imagine that the descendants of Isabel, Laura, Maria, and so many others would track your every syllable as you’d tracked theirs? In your wildest dreams, did you ever think that we would survive you?” (105). This last question, positioned on the last page of the third section, carries the weight of 104 pages describing the intensely violent structures of colonial violence and genocidal policies that were meant to eradicate Miranda’s people. When she asks if Harrington ever thought they would survive, the reader knows the answer is, rhetorically, a resounding “no”; the questions are a resounding assertion of survival. Read in relationship to “A Collage” these questions cement Miranda’s efforts to complicate salvage anthropological narratives at the level of form. By conflating descriptions of Harrington with Coyote on both pages, Miranda reifies that relationship. In turn this invites us as readers to consider that Coyote’s presence is, like in the creation story, supporting Miranda’s re-worlding process.

Lastly, and arguably most importantly, “A Collage” teaches readers how to reread salvage anthropological archives as Coyote stories rather than stories of extinction. Miranda’s assertion in the first section of the book is that Harrington’s archives are actually a record of Isabel Meadows’s “creative use of words, literacy, and empowerment on behalf of her community” (28). Meadows, Miranda argues, uses Harrington rather than the other way around: “Meadows knew she was a valuable resource to Harrington; he returned to her again and again, pleaded with her to work with no one else, snapped up the bits and pieces of

cultural information and language she fed him” (28). Meadows not only knew her value but further understood how to manipulate the anthropological record to save culturally resurgent information. As Miranda describes, “in between the language lessons and Coyote stories Harrington was after, Isabel snuck in the stories *she* wanted to salvage: her own private project, a memorial, a charmstone of hope for future generations” (28). Elsewhere, Miranda explores Meadows’s encoded stories as a form of gossip that functions as “a complex and deeply Indigenous documentation and explanation of intense *felt* experiences that illuminate . . . uniquely Indigenous strategies for agency and survival” (Miranda, “They Were Tough” 377). Her focus on the implications of the affective experiences of colonialism amplify the work of literary scholar Dian Million’s felt theory and locate an important nexus between storytelling and embodiment as strategies of agency and survival.

This becomes poignantly apparent in the story of Vicenta’s rape. Vicenta experiences sexual violence at the hands of a priest during the mission era, a story Miranda tells in the first section of the book. This story is passed down through generations until it reaches Meadows, who tells it to Harrington and ensures that it is recorded for future generations. Miranda extends Vicenta’s story with her own experience of sexual violence and situates herself in this genealogy of telling for survival by using parenthesis to allude to her own experience within the context of Vicenta’s narrative: “(It happened to me way before fourth grade)” (24). The parenthetical foreshadowing deconstructs the temporal distance between Vicenta’s and Miranda’s experiences of sexual assault and constructs a direct relation between the two as the direct result of colonialism in different centuries. By linking the affective and intimate to structures of settler violence across the centuries, she demonstrates the limits of settler narratives of California history and opens possibilities for reimagining personal storytelling as education and Indigenous agency. In other words, these stories become stories of instruction for survival meant to unite Native women’s experiences in order to affirm their experiences and raise them back up.

Miranda centers these stories as more than stories of victimry and tragedy; they are the narrative wisps drawn from the archives that teach, instruct, and transform women such as Vicenta into unlikely heroes.<sup>11</sup> The form of these educational narratives emerges out of settler archives

and personal testimonies and is transmitted through acts of storytelling. Miranda relies heavily on the archives of Harrington and Meadows to locate narrative fragments about her ancestors. In the process of her archival work she emphasizes the creative agency Meadows exerts in recording the kinds of stories she wants to preserve. Miranda draws a long relational arc between Vicenta's decision to tell about being raped in the mission era and Meadows's choice to continue to tell that story in the twentieth century: she calls Vicenta's story a "precursor to modern Native Literature" and a "teaching device for contemporary California Indian women" (28) and suggests that the act of telling is "potent," "medicinal," and "healing" for both teller and listener (29). Here the flexibility of the archives reveals possibilities for narrative agency for Native communities working to reclaim their own representative authority. Far from the narratives of erasure and extinction ethnographers meant to leave behind for posterity, Miranda's Coyote impulse to collect the resurgent fragments like Vicenta's reconfigures the entire genre of the field note for the purpose of raising her people up again.

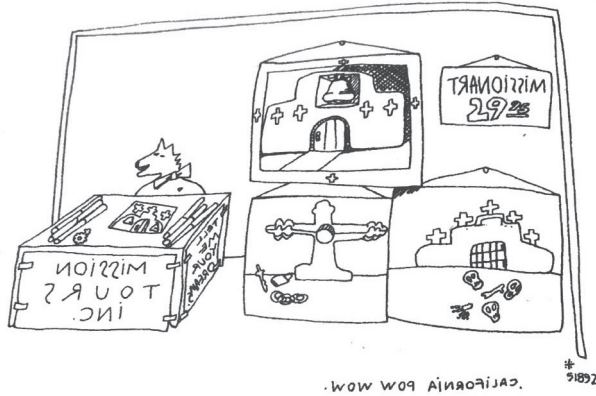
In a later publication Miranda explicitly invokes Coyote as she advances her theoretical work on archival recuperation and the significance of Isabel Meadows's storytelling practices ("They Were Tough" 396). In this work she turns to another story Meadows documented, that of Estéfana Real, a mission-era Indian woman whose documented sexual transgressions figure her as both a "bad Indian" and a survivor: "And because of her relentless expression of her pain, Estéfana makes her way into Isabel's stories and survives for many generations beyond her own lifespan, becoming a *mission-era Coyote* of sorts: a trickster, teacher, and hero figure for the future" (394, emphasis mine). Miranda's invocation of the term "mission-era Coyote" invites us to consider the productive potential of the phrase for reading *Bad Indians*. Miranda defines the role of Coyote here as a "trickster, teacher, and hero figure for the future," aligning her figuration of Coyote with popular tropes of Coyote that appear across North American Indigenous stories. In the provocative term "mission-era Coyote" Miranda unites her work on affect and trauma. Coyote refigures the felt experiences of colonialism and the ongoing affective experiences that resonate today. As a malleable, adaptable instructor and survivor, Coyote resists static narratives of trauma and victimhood and injects dynamic energy into them.

The Harrington collage demonstrates the flexibility of the archives, configuring them literally into a new form, but also blending colonized and colonizer voices together in an evocative demonstration that to make the new story it takes all of the storytellers. Miranda uses the form of the collage to assert that the genre of the field note is an Indigenous genre that encodes and transmits crucial cultural knowledge: “Through the vehicle of the field note we are engaged in a very Indigenous practice: that of storytelling as education, as thought-experiment, as community action to right a wrong, as resistance to representation as victim” (29). The creation story invites readers to consider the ways in which “A Collage” raises the people back up again affirms Coyote’s transformation of salvage anthropology and the resulting archives into resurgent stories that contain significant information about kinship, identity, and survival. Miranda’s efforts to transform the field note into Coyote stories that instruct participates in the unbroken tradition of storytelling as survival and worldbuilding.

#### DREAMING, COYOTE’S SIDE HUSTLE:

##### L. FRANK’S “CALIFORNIA POW WOW”

Miranda continues to incorporate different forms of media into *Bad Indians*. The inclusion of “California Pow Wow,” a Coyote comic by Acjachamen and Tongva artist L. Frank Manriquez (she commonly goes by L. Frank), compresses Miranda’s complex book-length argument into a single-panel image and creates relational pathways within the book and beyond. “California Pow Wow” depicts Coyote as a smiling salesman hocking mission art for the fictional company Mission Tours Inc. In a concise manner, the series of mission art works for sale within the comic unsettles what Miranda, in her introduction, terms the “visual mythology” of missions—that is, the pervasive architectural “bastardization” of mission-style buildings found throughout coastal California that “drains the missions of their brutal and bloody pasts for popular consumption” (xvii). Meanwhile, Coyote’s employment for Mission Tours Inc. further applies pressure to the easy commodification of mission mythologies and the “exorbitant amounts of money . . . made from the ruins of Native lives” (48). Frank’s “California Pow Wow” “adjust[s] the frames” of mission history and amplifies the work Miranda has already done across the book to unsettle the same narrative (Bernardin



"California Pow Wow," by L. Frank

Fig. 2. "California Pow Wow" by L. Frank Manriquez.  
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2). By invoking connections between the single-panel image and earlier sections of the book, Coyote connects the traumatic effects of colonization to the future-oriented practice of dreaming that not only restores but reimagines California Indian identities.

For Coyote's audience at the pow wow—primarily California Natives—these critiques are unsurprising and familiar. (For non-California Indians or non-Native audiences, more work is required to interpret this.) Non-Native literary scholar Susan Bernardin extensively theorizes the relational work of Coyote in L. Frank's comic series. Bernardin's core argument about Frank's Coyote aesthetics states that Coyote invites readers into a collaborative reading practice that "thwarts passive consumption" (11), "animates shifty, shifting questions of access, visibility, and intelligibility" (8), and recognizes California Native literature as always "on the move" (4). As Bernardin writes, the complex interplay between dominant visual narratives and what appears in Frank's Coyote comics "work in concert to demonstrate the ongoing, interactive relationship between past and present for Indigenous peoples" (15). Native audiences or audiences familiar with Native aesthetics are likely prepared to encounter Coyote as a figure who is complicating dominant narratives, and readers of *Bad Indians* will have already had this kind of encounter with him in "J. P. Harrington: A



Collage.” More than recognizable aesthetic presence, though, Coyote is also affirming a longstanding presence and connection with the origin story and therefore asserting survivance through the horrors of the missions by modeling how to move forward.

If Coyote is asserting survivance, the opportunism he displays in “California Pow-Wow” also asserts his world-building impulse. Certainly, Coyote is not one to miss the chance to profit from colonization; there is money in the mission tourism economy and as his position as representative for “Mission Tours Inc.” suggests, he is happily there to make a buck. But Coyote is also running a side hustle. A sign, hard to read, words written backward and at an angle, hangs on the right side of his booth inviting attendees forward to tell him their dreams. The sign, facing the right side of the panel, directs readers’ attention forward, toward the future, and incorporates dreams and dreaming as a crucial act of resistance to the commodification and erasure of California Indians in the rest of his business. In other words, while Coyote may be fully complicit in the economic systems of the settler state that continues to erase California Indian histories, to see Coyote at the table is a welcome sight; he is also subverting that very system and continues his work of raising the people back up again.

The criticisms and directional reading practices contained within Frank’s comic ground Coyote’s critique of missions in tribally-specific experiences and expand outward to create relational reading networks across *Bad Indians*. As mentioned, the mission art for sale within the comic centers the iconic architectural features of missions—their adobe walls, arches, terraced belfries, broad eaves, wooden doors, and low red tiled roofs—as sites of critique. These features are replicated in contemporary California architecture, from private homes to shopping malls to Taco Bells. Frank’s comic uses these iconic elements to restore this visual myth to its “brutal and bloody pasts,” and its placement within *Bad Indians* creates pathways between the first and fourth sections of the book. The first image in the series of art for sale looks like a “standard” mission—adobe walls, a bell hanging in the terraced belfry, cross-shaped adornments on the exterior wall, and an arched wooden door. Two features in particular, the door and the bell, are reminiscent of Miranda’s earlier glossary of terms and coloring book revision found in the first section. Miranda teaches us to read the mission bell as “the

voice of the padres" (9), their tolls "ordering us to prayer," "tell[ing] us to scatter to our work," "demand[ing] prayers or instruction in prayer" (9). Miranda revises the image of the bell through the second section, tying together the bell as a symbol of mission mythology to the rhetorical and physical violence leveled at California Native women. Similarly, the wooden door in the first image in "California Pow Wow" invokes the "huge carved doors" Miranda describes in "A Few Corrections to My Daughter's Coloring Book," in which her annotations identify the invisibilized presence of Native labor in the creation of those doors: "Carved by whom?" (21). Miranda's critique of the invisible labor is mirrored in Frank's comic in the way the door is replaced with a barred gate in the last image in the series of art for sale. The gate, paired with the cat-o-nine tail, three skeletons, and bone littered in the foreground of the mission, transform the mission into an institution of punishment and death and makes visible the violence typically contained within the mission walls. The comic rendering of the cat-o-nine tail whip invokes Miranda's glossary of terms: "A whip, usually made of cow or horse hide, with nine knotted lines, invented in and used throughout Europe and by pirates for various crimes" which might include "steel balls or barbs of wire" on "the ends of the lines to give them more striking force" (13, 14). Lastly, the gate and the skulls reinforce Miranda's comparison of missions to concentration camps and slave plantations: as an institution and a "conversion factory" the missions functioned more like a site of forced labor that used physical punishment to keep people in submission.

The juxtaposition of missions as sites of forced labor and genocidal violence with their iconic imagery activate reader participation to disentangle the contradictory narratives. This reading is reinforced by the fact that the comic appears immediately following a series of three school project worksheets in the section titled "Post-Colonial Thought Experiment." This thought experiment juxtaposes missions with a Birmingham slave plantation and the Dachau concentration camp (186–91). While the comic itself performs a similar critique of missions as sites of violence and death, its contextualization within *Bad Indians* creates relational pathways between multiple sections of the book. As Bernardin writes, "L. Frank's explosive mission cartoons refuse amnesia and obfuscation, hallmarks of California state origin stories" (20). As in "A Collage," "California Pow-Wow" invites readers to reconsider the

dominant narrative—salvage anthropology or “mission mythology”—and, following Coyote, reread the story with Native experiences at the center.

Following Coyote into a deconstructed vision of mission history also leads readers to his vision for the future, a future grounded in the act of dreaming. “Tell Me Your Dreams” is Coyote’s side project in “California Pow Wow.” Whereas Coyote faces smiling off toward the left of the panel, a backward gaze that draws the previous parts of the book into this image, “Tell Me Your Dreams” faces the right side of the panel and directs the momentum of the panel forward. The invitation to dream is a radical invitation in the context of colonialism in California. Left to right reading practices make this sign a bridge leading beyond the images of missions and out of the comic and toward the next page, a lyric essay titled “To Make Story in the World Again.” “To Make Story” asserts that to make a “fractured” story whole again “what is needed is a multilayered web of community reaching backward in time and forward in dream, questing deeply into the country of unknown memory” (193–94). In other words, Coyote facilitates a massive transition at this juncture in *Bad Indians*, from recuperating the narrative fragments of Native presence out of a violent past to dreaming toward a future rich with imagination and expressions of narrative resiliency. As Dian Million suggests, dreaming shifts boundaries and possibilities for what actions and visions become available (“There Is a River” 34).

The placement of Frank’s comic in *Bad Indians* mirrors the action in the panel itself: the tension between the reified institutions of death and the possibility of dreaming and future reimagines narratives of inevitable disappearance. Coyote’s appearance in this section, at this moment, teaches us how to reread the space between these two possibilities. Structurally Miranda has shifted boundaries across *Bad Indians* and invited readers into her process of making other stories available through her extensive archival work and mosaic work of piecing stories together in new and innovative ways. Coyote similarly has to dream his way into raising his people back up again.

Frank’s comic performs a complex critique of mission mythology and the visual perpetuation of a marketable and consumable colonial narrative. As Bernardin writes, the complex interplay between dominant visual narratives and what appears in Frank’s Coyote comics “work in concert to demonstrate the ongoing, interactive relationship between

past and present for Indigenous peoples” (15). In its inclusion in *Bad Indians* Frank’s “California Pow Wow” “adjust[s] the frames” of mission history and amplifies the work Miranda has already done across the book to unsettle the same narrative (Bernardin 2). “California Pow Wow” echoes, in abbreviated visual form, the same unsettling narrative Miranda is constructing through the rest of *Bad Indians*.

#### “COYOTE TAKES A TRIP”: A NEW CREATION STORY

In the two previous readings, Coyote has modeled how to reclaim the archives and reimagine settler histories as he rebuilds his world. In this final reading, I consider Miranda’s inclusion of her short story “Coyote Takes a Trip” as a story of restoration and creation grounded in language and embodiment. Crafted in the style of traditional Coyote tales, its original publication in the 2011 anthology, *Sovereign Erotics: A Collection of Two-Spirit Literature* foregrounds its significance for theorizing sexuality in not only Native contexts but, I argue, tribally specific narrative worldviews. The creation story reminds us that Coyote is the father of the tribes; in “Coyote Takes a Trip” sexuality and creation become entangled and interlocking discourses that generatively move toward restoration and (re)creation. The restoration of Coyote’s sexual “mojo” in this story is additionally linked with the restoration of the Chumash word for Two-Spirit relations, underscoring the intimate relationship between language and identity in Native communities.<sup>12</sup>

In “Coyote Takes a Trip,” Coyote’s “sexual prowess” is dampened by winter’s cold weather and cold company in Venice Beach, California, and so he sets out to leave in search of warmer climates and warmer women. En route to the airport, though, he encounters a not-quite-beautiful but well-put-together, “[s]uave” transgender Indio woman. The woman gives him “the eye” after he accidentally exposes his genitalia on the bus, and her seeming admiration of his “prowess” restores his mojo, “like an illegal firecracker smuggled off the rez” (183).

This encounter restores more than his “mojo”; in trying to identify the appropriate word to describe the woman, Coyote also returns to and restores the use of Chumash language, bypassing the Spanish language and its associated rhetorical violence. The search for language is, like his encounter with the Indio woman, a sensuous one: Coyote is depicted “licking his chops” as he searches for the old word that captures who

she was: “Standing on the sidewalk, Coyote rolled his slippery pink tongue around in his mouth as if he could rattle the lost names out from between his teeth somewhere” (184). The embodied, physical nature of language restoration demonstrated by Coyote captures not only the complexity of disentangling identities from colonial languages, but a creative relationship between sexuality, language, and worldmaking.

Although “Coyote Takes a Trip” is a contemporary story, Miranda intersperses quotes from mission-era Spanish soldiers’ and priests’ journals describing Two-Spirit people in California Native communities. In the same way that Miranda collapses the temporality between Vicenta’s and her own story of rape in the first section, she collapses the rhetorical marginalization of Two-Spirit people with the mission-era formation of those rhetorical divides. “Coyote Takes a Trip” opens with a block quote in large print by a soldier named Pedro Fages who, in 1775, documents “Indian men who . . . are observed in the dress, clothing, and character of women” and “pass as sodomites by profession” and “practice the execrable, unnatural abuse of their bodies” (178). Fages observes that “They are called *joyas* [jewels], and are held in great esteem” (178). Father Gerónimo Boscana observed that the founders of the San Diego missions “found men dressed as women and performing women’s duties,” who, “Being more robust than the women, . . . were better able to perform the arduous duties required of the wife, and for this reason, they were often selected by the chiefs and others” for partnership (181). Father Francisco Palou observed an incident at the Santa Clara mission in which a “*joya*” was caught in an “unspeakably sinful act” with another man and that their punishment hardly fit “the enormity of their deed” (184). When asked to defend themselves, “the pagan replied that the *joya* was his wife” (184). Encoded in these quotes are significant representations of what the Spanish called *joyas*—what we today would call Two-Spirit peoples and what Coyote recalls as *’aqi* in the Chumash language—as community members of “great esteem” who were “often selected by the chiefs” as partners for their respected work in communities and who were valued as committed partners in sustaining relationships. These quotes, in other words, contradict the intended purpose of the Spanish to represent these community members as “unnatural” and “sinful”: rather the fragmented descriptions, when pieced together, encapsulate a robust portrait of a culture in which Two-Spirit peoples

have distinct roles and are respected members of the community, and who enter into committed and mutual relationships with partners.

Pairing “Coyote Takes a Trip” with Spanish archival descriptions of Two-Spirit people rhetorically bridges the first section of the book with the fourth and centers the way that language, paired with physical violence, was and continues to be wielded as a tool of cultural dispossession and erasure. Miranda links the end of the world, that is, the ability for Esselen and Chumash ways of being and living following colonization, to the role of the Two-Spirit community member and again to the further erasure of the figure through language: “Then the soldiers came, the priests came, christened us *joyas*, jewels, laughing at how our tribes treated us—sodomites, *nefando pecados*, *mujerados*—as treasures. Treasures? They called us monsters. *Joya* was a joke. But we had other names before that: *aqi*, *coia*, *cuit*, *uluqui*, endearments only the ancestors remember” (31). Coyote’s encounter with the woman in the contemporary moment sends him searching back through the centuries of linguistic erasure for the correct term for the person who was not a “little old lady” but an “*impressed*—old man” (183); he thinks

Not exactly a man. What was that old word?

*Joto*?

No, older than that, and sweeter.

*Joya*? Jewel of the People? (183)

Coyote is not satisfied with “*joya*” because it conjures memories of Spanish brutality against Two-Spirit people. He continues: “Nope, still Spanish, and just thinking it conjured up vile images of humiliation before loved ones, being stripped naked, mastiffs set loose, flesh and souls mutilated” (183). The provocative imagery of dog attacks and tearing flesh specifically recalls an essay titled “Cousins” in the first section of *Bad Indians*, in which Miranda writes a tribute to a Two-Spirit relative named Victor. “Cousins” is written from the collective “we” point of view and recalls the specific forms of violence targeted at Two-Spirit people: “In the missions, we were stripped bare, whipped, made to sweep the plaza for days . . . ‘In the south, we fed your kind to our dogs,’ soldiers grinned, and stroked the heads of their mastiffs” (31). The repetition of key terms such as “stripped” and “mastiffs” reminds readers that the Spanish word “*joya*” invokes imagery and memory of violence

and fear that spans centuries and represents language as a crucial mechanism of colonial dispossession and erasure.

Coyote refuses to stop at the language of the colonizer and perseveres to locate the correct Chumash term. This is, as previously mentioned, a sensuously embodied remembering for Coyote: his “mouth remembered” what his mind could not and the word came to him— “*aqi!*” (184).

But the interplay of “Cousins” and “Coyote Takes a Trip” across the book actively restores the creative, life-giving position of Two-Spirit people in their communities. “Cousins” affirms that one of the primary roles of Two-Spirit people was to open “the way for the next generation,” give “birth to the tribe’s future,” and “midwife the dead” (31). That is, they were responsible for saving the world but were “disappeared, murdered, or heartbroken” and “the end of the world came anyway” (31).

Coyote dislocates the Chumash word from his mouth and affirms two things: not everyone has forgotten and the work can be rekindled. Coyote’s act of language recovery reverberates across time and across the book, echoing Victor, who thinks,

How strange it is, now, to hear young voices calling to us. . . . Who remembers us? Who pulls us, forgotten, from beneath melted adobe and groomed golf courses and asphalted freeways, asks for our help, rekindles the work of our lives? . . .

Where have you been? Why have you waited so long? How did you ever find us, buried under words like *joto*, like *joya*, under whips and lies? (31–32)

The soggy story world of Venice Beach in the winter begins as a dead end for Coyote. But read within the context of the creation story we know that a flood marks the beginning of the Esselen world.<sup>13</sup> Venice Beach is Chumash territory, which complicates this reading on one hand; on the other, with the knowledge that Miranda’s father is also Chumash, it broadens our reading practice to consider the trans-Indigenous<sup>14</sup> application of creation stories in a California context.

#### FINAL NOTES TOWARD A NEW WORLD

Following Coyote through *Bad Indians* leads us on a journey through archives, languages, visual mythologies, and more. The Coyote stories

Miranda selects to include perform crucial reparative work in between the testimonies to the pernicious and ongoing effects of colonial violence in California. Moving between these stories and across the book, Coyote models how to connect these disparate fragments together and dream forward toward possibilities for vibrant Indigenous futures. These futures are grounded in connections to the past and anchored in the original act of creation in the Esselen world.

Following Coyote also leads us toward productive future work with *Bad Indians*. Beyond the decolonization of historical narratives and formal storytelling devices, how might Coyote create conditions by which tribes such as the Esselen can rightfully advocate for the return of lands, for example? Or, remaining in the realm of the literary, what productive new relationships emerge when we learn how to follow other First Beings such as Eagle and Hummingbird through California Native literatures as well? With Coyote as a guide, the possibilities for building California Native futures are endless.

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#### NOTES

1. "The only good Indian is a dead Indian" is a proverb commonly attributed to General Philip Sheridan, although its origin cannot be definitely traced. For more on the genealogy of this statement, see Wolfgang Mieder's "'The Only Good Indian is a Dead Indian': History and Meaning of a Proverbial Stereotype." *The Journal of American Folklore*, vol. 106, no. 419, 1993, pp. 38–60.

2. For a deeper examination of Native peoples' refusal to conform to the Western mythos of "Indianness," see Gerald Vizenor's *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance*.

3. Coyote is gendered differently depending on the tribal context of the particular Coyote narrative. I follow Gonzalaez and Soto, as well as Miranda, in their use of the male pronoun to refer to the Coyote of the Costanoan peoples. For more on Coyote's gender specificity and fluidity, see Risling Baldy's article "Coyote is Not a Metaphor."

4. Smith's *Decolonizing Methodologies*, originally published in 1999, has become a foundational work advocating for the inclusion of Indigenous ways of knowing and thinking in academic research spaces.

5. American Indian and Indigenous literary scholars have not centered Native California in any kind of robust way and as a result the literatures of Native California remain understudied, undertheorized, and underappreciated. Literary



scholars beyond the California Indian community who have taken California as a critical site of Indigenous cultural production include Gerald Vizenor, Mark Rifkin, and Susan Bernardin. There are many California Native scholars across disciplines who are developing rich scholarship on California, including Wailaki and Concow of the Round Valley historian William Bauer Jr., Hupa anthropologist Cutcha Risling Baldy, non-Native historian Brendan Lindsay, Pomo writer Greg Sarris, and more. And California Native artists and writers themselves continue to create theoretically complex and grounded knowledges of California. These include Luiseño performance artist James Luna, Hopi and Miwok poet Wendy Rose, Concow and Maidu poet Janice Gould, and of course, Deborah Miranda, among many, many others.

6. For just a glimpse into the scholarly responses to Miranda's work, see Theresa Warburton, "A Similar Place: Resistance and Existence in 21st Century Black and Native Women's Memoirs." *Cultural Studies <-> Critical Methodologies*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2017, pp. 41–49; Laura M. Furlan, "The Archives of Deborah Miranda's *Bad Indians*." *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, this issue; Susan Bernardin, "Acorn Soup is Good Food: L. Frank, News from Native California, and the Intersections of Literary and Visual Arts." *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, vol. 27, no. 3, fall 2015, pp. 1–33; Shanae Martinez, "Intervening in the Archive: Women-Water Alliances, Narrative Agency, and Reconstructing Indigenous Space in Deborah Miranda's *Bad Indians: A Tribal Memoir*" *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, vol. 30, nos. 3–4, 2018, pp. 54–71; and Mark Rifkin, *Beyond Settler Time: Temporal Sovereignty and Indigenous Self-Determination*. Duke UP, 2017.

7. Survivance is Gerald Vizenor's now-established concept that blends "survival" and "resistance" together to affirm Indigenous presence in spite of colonial policies of eradication and erasure.

8. Tatonetti defines Indigenous assemblage as "intensely relational" networks of "pasts and presents that fluidly intersect, overlap, and rearrange through the *felt* experience of history and memory" (146). For more see her essay, "Indigenous Assemblage and Queer Diasporas in the Work of Janice Gould," found in *The Queerness of Native American Literature* (2014).

9. In his 2018 book, *Beyond Settler Time: Temporal Sovereignty and Indigenous Self-Determination*, non-Native literary scholar Mark Rifkin attempts to "pluralize temporality so as to open possibilities for engaging with Indigenous self-articulations, forms of collective life, and modes of self-determination beyond their incorporation or translation into settler frames of reference" (ix).

10. I include photos of both the Harrington collage and L. Frank's comic, "California Pow Wow," in this essay to support readers' experience of the materials.

11. I use the term "narrative wisp" to describe the narrative fragments Miranda collects to construct her mosaic. In doing so I follow Anishinaabe writer and scholar Gerald Vizenor's use of the term in his essay "Trickster Discourse," where he uses it to describe Native American literatures as "understudied landscapes . . . storied with narrative wisps and tribal discourses" (279). Vizenor in turn adapts the phrase from Jean-Francois Lyotard, who uses the phrase to describe the "mass of millions" of stories people tell which become "collected together to constitute big stories and sometimes disperse into digressive elements" (Lyotard, qtd. in Carroll 85). In my

work, this term productively implies agency for the narrative—that is, the narrative contains the capacity to transgress, or refuses to be contained in settler paradigms.

12. Qwo-Li Driskill argues that Indigenous Two-Spirit and GLBTQ people assert “uniquely Native-centered and tribally specific understandings of gender and sexuality as a way to critique colonialism” (69). I follow their use of the term “Two-Spirit” to signal that Miranda engages gender and sexuality in “Coyote Takes a Trip” in this way, to complicate colonial formations that exclude non-normative expressions of gender and sexuality.

13. In fact, watery worlds are the point of origin for many California tribes. See Kroeber’s “Indian Myths of South Central California,” 167–250.

14. I define literary scholar Chadwick Allen’s productive term trans-Indigenous to mean that we can use one tribal or Indigenous worldview to help us understand another. Here I suggest that it is helpful to use the Costanoan creation story to think about the ways “Coyote Takes a Trip” maps Chumash space and waters.

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