

Killing the Indian:

A Review of William S. Yellow Robe's Grandchildren of the Buffalo Soldiers

By Alexia Kosmider

By forcing his audience to grapple with the slippery and ambiguous word “Indian” and what it signifies, William S. Yellow Robe slashes, like he wields a hunting knife, at the heart and soul of what embodies much of his literary vision---the pain and suffering racial prejudice causes individuals and families. Like his last play Better-n-Indins, Yellow Robe examines the effect of the word “Indian” on indigenous people. To be an Indian, an individual has to be culturally an Indian. If a person says he’s Indian and other Indian people accept him as an Indian, then is that person an Indian? Sardonic comments arise in the course of the play’s performance that contests our perceptions about Indianness. As when Craig Robe, a member of the Assiniboine Nation who has been away from the rez for some time, asks his brother, Brent: “Since when did the people here start saying “Aho””? Brent replies: “Pow-wow etiquette. Some folks just started to be more Indin’ than the other Indin.” It is the sarcastic moments that are dangerously poignant: laughter spills out from audience members causing individuals to lean forward in their seats and to think.

For there is much to think about and to experience in this fearless, heart-felt play. Yellow Robe’s audience learns that leaving the rez is like embarking on a journey to a foreign country. Craig Robe, who has returned home to participate in his niece’s naming ceremony, tells his younger brother, Elmo, that family members are assembling to rehearse. Elmo interjects—we don’t say “rehearse” here—we say “practice.” Craig, who has been back east, has slipped into the vernacular of European-Americans, something which Indian people listen for, and anticipate when someone from their tribe moves away. Does this slippage mean that a tribal member has shape-shifted into a non-indigenous person? I don’t know but apparently Elmo listens and wonders. The parameters around the word “Indian” are permeable, transforming to suit a specific individual’s necessity to create identity, or outside society’s need to control the word and its usage. We become increasingly aware of the focus of Yellow Robe’s vision that this word and its meaning must cease being spoken, in order for individuals to heal. The word and its spin of erroneous signification of indigenous people must die as Yellow Robe wants his audience to discover that it rips at the lifeblood of Indian

Nations. Brothers and sisters shun younger brothers—cousins call one another “breed”—it is not the idyllic Indian life Kevin Costner paints in Dancing with Wolves.

In Grandchildren of the Buffalo Soldiers we meet Kevin Walking who ambles into the pow-wow grounds and spies another Indian man, Craig Robe. Kevin Walking takes his clues for being Indian from the outside world: he is a card carrying Indian (i.e. an enrolled member of his tribe) that plays a “real” Indian in a Hollywood film, although no one in his tribe spotted him in the premiere of the “big” Hollywood film. He feels more entitled to claim his Indian ancestry as he’s part white and therefore feels justified to ridicule and to insult Craig Robe, also a member of Kevin Walking’s tribe, but Craig’s family traces its ancestors to a Buffalo Soldier. It is the lashing out with words that hurt, “hasapa”, “nigger”, Buffalo Soldier, words that encircle like a bone choker around a person’s neck, forcing another outside the circle of family and tribe. Later on we witness Craig at a field where his relatives, including his deceased grandfather, an African American, camped over a hundred years ago. His grandmother and grandfather, shunned by his tribe because his grandfather was a Buffalo soldier, lived on the borders of the Indian camp. Craig speaks to his dead grandfather and grandmother: “Did it hurt worst when your own people made fun of, or called you...never mind.” He can’t utter the words, “nigger,” Buffalo Soldier, that Kevin Walking had just called him. Craig, whose descendents are also black, fights daily to keep alive his family’s pride in being Indian. It is a high stakes game that Kevin Walking and others like him play, decimating individuals like Craig Robe’s sense of belonging: an interracial war rages on the rez.

Grandchildren of the Buffalo Soldiers exposes this game, a game that rips Indian families apart. If we’re not indigenous, we may be like Kevin Walking, taking our signs for judging and determining indigenous cultures and life ways from Hollywood, anthropologists, and the federal government’s decision of who holds tribal cards. Yellow Robe’s play, however, is an interrogative act that deconstructs persistent narratives derived from the colonizer. Most individuals are at least aware of some of the overt results of European/American relations with indigenous cultures, which include the dominant culture’s suppression of indigenous religious practices, languages, and many other indigenous cultural beliefs, exerted as a way to control, to displace, or to annihilate indigenous cultures. But Native people, like other

colonized people, do not merely suffer their condition but actively respond and resist. Craig Robe, angry and deemed a troublemaker by his some of his own relatives, produces a discourse that disrupts the production of the colonized subject. Craig tells his younger brother, Brent, who has married into an Indian family by forsaking his own family's African American ancestors: "You know what I learned when I was on the road Brent. Visiting different Native people. Some people introduce themselves by their Tribe or Nation. Nobody calls themselves 'Indian' in their own language. It doesn't exist. Only White people call us that. After so many years we started to believe we are 'Indian'. We aren't."

Brent, like Kevin Walking, constructs his sense of identity from outside his culture and that is why he resists doing the jig that his father, an African American, inherited from Canadian Crees. That's not an Indian dance. But being a member of the Assiniboine Nation is not that simplistic: culture cannot be reduced to a set of attributes nor does culture remain static. Assiniboine tribal members eat spam omelets and call themselves indigenous—it is not simply the assimilation of cultural artifacts that constitutes a sense of tribalism that William Yellow Robe wants his audience to understand. Grandchildren of the Buffalo Soldiers provides its viewers with an indigenous perspective, a form of a re-education of what embodies indigenous cultures and identities. It is the un-learning that becomes necessary to survive and what ultimately emerges is a new formation of beliefs and values that operate to delegitimize the "captured" cultural construct of "Indian." It thus seems necessary that a hunting knife is needed to kill the "Indian" as a means to legitimize a new sense of indigenous belonging.

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