

# FROM MARGINALIZED SUBJECT TO SOVEREIGN SELF:

Autobiography as a Means of Talking Back in  
James Tyman's *Inside Out*

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A recent report by the Government of Canada's Office of the Correctional Investigator states officially what many have known for a long time to be true: the prison population of Canada is grossly over-represented by indigenous people: "Today, 21% of the federal inmate population claims Aboriginal ancestry" the report states, despite the fact that indigenous peoples comprise only 4.3% of the larger population, according to the 2011 National Household Survey (see *Spirit Matters: Aboriginal People and the Corrections and Conditional Release Act*, 22 Oct. 2012). This terrifying disparity in numbers only reveals part of a much larger problem in Canada's relation to indigenous peoples, however: the targeting of and systemic discrimination against indigenous people by the so-called justice system in this country is part of a multifaceted set of interlocking racist and colonialist structures. There are, of course, individuals and communities behind these statistical and institutional analyses, and any attempt to attack the biases inherent in those structures must begin with their voices and stories. Jesse Abell's thoughtful engagement with James Tyman's *Inside Out* provides a wonderful example of a careful listening to one such story, as she responds to Tyman's own careful articulation of the wide-ranging emotional, social, and political effects of those racist and colonial structures and their expression in the prison system.

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James Tyman's autobiography *Inside Out* can be read as an exercise in "talking back" to hegemonic discourses which seek to culturally marginalize him both as an Aboriginal man, and as a convicted prisoner (Smith 20). In *Inside Out*, Tyman positions his life as one of continual cultural marginalization in which he is repeatedly threatened by identity erasure. As an Aboriginal youth adopted by a white, middle-class family, from a young age Tyman feels culturally isolated and without individual identity. It is only through crime that Tyman is eventually able to construct an identity for himself as a respected person of the streets. However, in prison, Tyman is threatened by a second instance of identity erasure as he becomes yet another repeat-offender doing time. Ultimately, in *Inside Out*, James Tyman uses autobiography as a means to narrativize his experiences and sentiments, to challenge dominant perceptions of himself, and to assert his individual agency for self-representation. By positioning himself as an autobiographical subject, Tyman is able to assert identity in response to his threatened

double erasure within both Canadian society and the prison system. Furthermore, he is able to reclaim his personal sovereignty.

Tyman's *Inside Out* can be read in relation to Western conceptions of a "universal subject" (Smith 5). Sidonie Smith argues that, from the Enlightenment onward, the West has been engaged in constructing an individual self, "a universal human subject who is marked individually" (5). This Enlightenment subject – the individual self – is positioned as autonomous and rational, a unique and self-contained entity that continues to bear universal markers (Smith 9). However, the universal subject is defined on the basis of exclusion rather than inclusion. As Smith explains, "[t]o secure the universality of the self, cultural practices set various limits, and those limits are normative limits of race, gender, sexuality, and class identification" (10). Those who do not fit within the normative boundaries of the universal subject – i.e., white, male, heterosexual, and elite – are culturally marginalized and culturally embodied.

Smith argues that traditional Western autobiography is premised on the assumption that there is such a universal subject to represent. Traditional Western autobiography

is underpinned by the notion that the unique life story of the author can speak to some common ground shared between the author and all readers – so long as author and readers are male, white, heterosexual, and elite. As such, autobiography has secured its status as a “master discourse” of the West, working to define and empower a universal subject, delineate its limits, and disenfranchise its Others (Smith 18).

Yet Smith also explores the extent to which autobiography can be used by these culturally marginalized Others as a means of “talking back” (20). Smith explains that these Others enter the genre of autobiography “precisely because they experience ‘alienation from the historically imposed image of the self’ culturally assigned them” (20). For all their prominence, dominant narratives of the universal subject are never “homogenous and all-encompassing in [their] effects” (Smith 21). Smith argues that there are always fault lines within dominant culture and its discourses that Other, non-dominant, voices are able to break through. Autobiography offers an important arena in which hegemonic narratives can be contested and displaced by non-hegemonic narratives, and in which the culturally

marginalized subject can resist his or her marginalization.

In his autobiography, Tyman talks back to the hegemonic narratives that seek to culturally marginalize and embody him both as an aboriginal man and as a convicted criminal. Tyman asserts that his life has been one of continual cultural marginalization in which he has been repeatedly denied individual identity. In his autobiography, Tyman relates how at the age of four he was removed from his aboriginal community by the provincial social services system and adopted by the white, middle-class Tyman family. Although the Tyman family offers him love and a respite from the violence and poverty that characterized life with his biological family, Tyman still experiences a great deal of racism within his community during his childhood. Tyman speaks of his third year in school:

I began to hate myself that year. I was getting teased by the white kids, and nothing I said seemed to matter [ . . . ] 'My family is white.' 'Doesn't matter. They bought you. You're an Indian.' I'd go home and scrub my hands, hoping to wash the darkness off" (15).

To the white children at his school, Tyman becomes a representative of a race. He, and his individual identity, are silenced, subsumed within a racial identity for which he is made to feel ashamed. Jason Haslam explains that the racism Tyman is subjected to in his adoptive community “has a silencing effect” on his individual identity (484). Tyman is “‘thrown under’ a silencing racist power structure” to the extent that he becomes unable to articulate himself outside of it (Haslam 484). Tyman’s silencing by racism is reinforced by the way in which he becomes unable to even articulate his experience of being silenced. Tyman finds it difficult to discuss what it means to be aboriginal – or his experiences of being hated on the basis of being aboriginal – with anyone in the community, including his adoptive family. Tyman reflects that he “never told anyone” about the racism he was subjected to by children at school (15): “I never asked my parents about these stories about Indians [ . . . ] What was an Indian supposed to act like? My mom and dad bought me? Could that be possible? I never asked them. I just kept it all inside” (15-16). Tyman is constructed as a racialized subject by white members of his community, and silenced on that basis; a racist

social structure not only identifies him as an “Indian,” but forces him to internalize – rather than enabling him to discuss with anyone – the problems of what being an “Indian” means.

Thus, as an Aboriginal individual living with a white family in a racist community, Tyman also grows up with a sense of cultural isolation. He is neither fully accepted by Aboriginal people in town, nor fully accepted by his white classmates. As Tyman asserts,

Here was a dilemma, though: the reserve Indians hated me because my friends were “white trash,” as they put it, and most of the white kids hated me because I was a “scummy Indian.” (18)

Tyman’s sense of cultural alienation is partly the result of the Tyman family’s reluctance to discuss or validate his heritage. They do not tell him about his biological family and they lie to him about where he was born. After Tyman discovers his adoption papers in his parents’ bedroom one summer, he feels increasingly isolated from them. Tyman relates,

I felt angry because the Tymans hadn’t told me the truth. [ . . . ] I felt alienated from the Tymans and ‘their relatives,’ as I put it. [ . . . ] I wanted to talk, to ask questions. But I didn’t want to rock the boat. (26)

At once alienated from his biological aboriginal family, and unable to integrate into his adoptive white, middle-class community, Tyman occupies a cultural no man's land in which his individual identity is under erasure. Tyman asserts of his relationship with his adoptive mother, "I got everything I needed, except a sense of identity. [ . . . ] I just didn't know who I was, or where I came from. No one told me. No one seemed to care" (64). Tyman is not only prevented from fully identifying with either his biological or his adopted families, but also from discussing his identity problems with anyone around him. As a result, he moves to the streets to find a new community in which to belong.

The subculture of the street is attractive to Tyman from the beginning; he sees it as an alternative community of outcasts in which he can acquire dignity and identity. He explains,

They scoffed at work, honkies and authority. More important, they had respect. They had identity. They were street people. That was their identity, their worth, and they loved it and accepted it. I wanted it. (Tyman 70)

The subculture of the street is a community in which drugs, prostitution, and crime are



prevalent. It offers Tyman the chance to earn an air of fear and respect instead of being the object of pity and scorn. As Deena Rymhs notes, “[t]he street is a place of belonging with its own values and hierarchy. For Tyman, it offers ‘entrepreneurial,’ self-making potential” (*Iron House* 44). The subculture of the street offers Tyman self-making potential in both an existential and an economic capacity. To begin with, the street is a space in which Tyman is able to fashion an identity. Further, it is a space in which Tyman is able to make something of himself, to become a self-made man through crime. In Tyman’s autobiography, the street is positioned as a place in which he is able to forge an identity, earn himself social recognition, and find a livelihood.

Yet through committing crime, Tyman comes into contact with the law. In prison – to which he is repeatedly sent from the age of 18 onward – Tyman is threatened by a second identity erasure. Tyman asserts that when he was incarcerated for the first time, he had hopes for prison’s reformatory capacity. He expected that prison would be a place where he would be taught marketable skills, and prepared for a life off the street. Yet his

expectations are quickly proven wrong. Tyman explains,

I thought the system was going to train me, give me parole, and push me in the direction of a new life. I must have still been on acid when I was thinking up that scenario. (104)

Tyman is not given useful work experience, and prison is a place of monotonous routine. The prison system strips Tyman of the respect and dignity he earned in committing crime on the streets, and inhibits his self-sovereignty and his capacity for self-identification. Haslam comments, "Tyman's identity, like that of all prisoners, is delineated by the legal texts of the prison system, which label him as a certain type of criminal (drug user, thief, etc.), by the relations he establishes with other prisoners, by the 'correctional' facilities of the prison" (484-485). In jail, Tyman is positioned as nothing more than another young, drug-using offender doing time.

The power of the prison system is such that it limits Tyman's capacity for fashioning a self once he is outside. After he is released from prison, Tyman continues to feel that his individual identity is under threat of erasure as a result of his status as a convicted offender.

Tyman reflects upon his first release from jail, “‘Come on Jim,’ I kept telling myself. ‘You were only there three months. Forget it and start fresh.’ But I kept thinking that everyone knew I was a criminal. They wouldn’t give me a chance” (114). Just as Tyman suffered the silencing effects of racist discourses in his white community growing up, so too does he suffer the silencing effects of the legal discourses of the prison system. Even once he is out of jail, these discourses continue to act upon him, constructing him as a criminalized subject rather than a self-governing individual able to do what he likes and “start fresh” (Tyman 1995: 114). Furthermore, the extent to which penal discourses continue to silence Tyman’s individual identity is reinforced by the way in which he is unable to articulate his experience of being silenced, even after he is released from prison. After his release, Tyman has difficulty discussing what it means to be a criminal – or to be permanently marked as a criminal – even with his friend Terry, who has also been to jail. Tyman relates of their first meeting:

I felt companionship with him more than ever now. We understood each other. We talked briefly about my incarceration, but it was more

of a silent conversation. I mentioned the racism and he nodded his understanding. I mentioned the bulls, and he nodded. He mentioned the filth, and I nodded. What did it all mean? Besides being marked for life, what was the meaning of it? Who benefited? Who jumped with joy at my incarceration? Is society better? Am I better? (114-115)

Despite Tyman's assertion that he feels "companionship" with Terry, and that they "understood each other," their conversation is mostly "silent" and superficial (Tyman 114). The two men do not discuss the implications of having been to jail, and Tyman's questions are rhetorical; he does not ask Terry "What did it all mean?" but keeps this question to himself. The penal system has identified Tyman as a criminal, and forces him to internalize - rather than enabling him to discuss with anyone - the problems of what being a criminal means, even once he is out of jail. Indeed, the penal system constructs Tyman as an object rather than an agent of representation, and he is prevented from asserting an identity for himself apart from his crimes. Tyman's repeated encounters with the cops, as well as incarcerations, drill into him that he can be nothing except a "Fuckin' Big Indian" (Tyman 204). When Tyman's partner Donna asks him near the end

of the autobiography why he does not try to go straight, to move away from crime, to gain honest employment, and to feel pride in his aboriginal heritage, he responds angrily: "I was going to, but I got stabbed, so I couldn't work. And besides, Donna, I'm an ex-con. Who wants an ex-con, and an Indian besides?" (205). Unable to fit within the normative boundaries of Smith's universal subject, Tyman feels culturally marginalized and culturally embodied by hegemonic discourses of this subject. His individual identity has been erased; as he asserts to Donna, he is nothing but a "Fuckin' Big" body, marked by his race and his history of incarceration (204).

Yet in the last section of his autobiography, entitled "Recovery," Tyman undergoes a transformation. Back in prison, serving a two-year sentence, Tyman begins to engage in life writing, and is able to reconstruct an individual identity in resistance to hegemonic discourses of the penal system and Canadian society. Tyman explains on the last page of the book, "I have a new attitude this time [ . . . ] The hatred is gone. The shame of being Indian is not there. The thought of living by crime once I get out isn't there" (226). Constructing himself as an autobiographical

subject, Tyman is able to attest to feeling pride in his racial identity, and look forward to a life beyond crime. Tyman claims an individual identity as an Aboriginal man that denies the “socially constructed stereotypes” of aboriginal people and criminals “and the shame associated with them” in the prison system (Haslam 488), as well as in Canadian society, more generally. In the last line of the book, Tyman asserts, “I will make it. My gut feelings tell me that” (226). Ultimately, the conclusion of the memoir can be read as a movement away from the memoir, a call to the future and “to the Tyman who exists outside of the text” (Haslam 490). Haslam argues, “The Tyman who is a subject of our reading creates, through the last line, a Tyman who exists outside of the text and therefore outside of our ability to read him” (490). Tyman transforms himself through life writing, constructing himself an individual identity that is no longer subject of, or subject to, others’ readings of him, and so becomes fully autonomous and self-contained.

James Tyman’s transformation can be read in relation to the larger project of prison writing. Rymhs argues that prison authors such as James Tyman work to write against

negative public perceptions of prisoners, and, in Tyman's case, Aboriginal people more generally, by conveying through life narratives their experiences outside and inside of prison. Rymhs attests,

many of these writings lay claim to the agency of self-representation to explore their authors' personal histories and feelings about imprisonment. [ . . . ] [and] intervene in public perceptions of their authors and of the nature of life inside the joint. ("Docile" 314)

Rymhs argues that autobiography is an important medium for prisoners such as Tyman to narrativize their experiences and sentiments, to challenge dominant constructions of themselves, and to position themselves as individuals with agency for self-representation ("Docile" 314). Indeed, life writing enables prisoners to claim a space for themselves as autonomous agents. By constructing themselves as autobiographical subjects, prisoners are able to "re-construct a 'sovereign self'" that was removed from them at the time of their incarceration (Rymhs "Docile" 314). Writing enables prisoners to assert an identity in response to "their threatened erasure in the prison," as well as to position themselves as authorities proposing

narratives of life in prison that run counter to those told by the state ("Docile" 315).

Furthermore, prison writing can be understood to lay the ground for "alternative jurisprudence" (Rymhs "Docile" 315). Rymhs argues that in their writing, prisoners are able to challenge their representation by the legal, judicial and penal systems, while also making this challenge available to a wider public. Rymhs asserts,

The desire to set the record straight [ . . . ] is what 'propel[s] some prison writers into being.' For convicted authors, their writing often serves as a second hearing, one that intervenes in the law and the singular judgment it imparts. ("Docile" 315)

Imprisoned authors such as Tyman can be understood as working to displace the authority that convicted, imprisoned, and Othered them while appealing to a larger audience in order to explain why this authority should be displaced.

Ultimately, Tyman's autobiography can be read as an example of resistance writing, working to dislodge cultural, legal, and penal discourses that have sought to marginalize and mark him as Other within Canadian society (Harlow 5). In *Inside Out*, Tyman presents his



life as having been one of repeated cultural marginalization and embodiment in which he has been continually denied an individual identity. Only by positioning himself as an autobiographical subject is Tyman able to assert identity in response to his threatened double erasure, and to reclaim sovereignty as an aboriginal man proud of his racial heritage, working toward a life beyond crime. Tyman transforms himself through life writing, ultimately fashioning himself an individual identity that is no longer a subject of, or subject to, others' readings of him, and so comes to be fully autonomous and self-contained.

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