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Tom King's John Wayne
The Western in *Green Grass, Running Water*

Mouth-sore with bad breath,
A runny-eyed roan, sway-backed,
What kind of a horse is death?
—Louis Phillips, "Considering the Death of John Wayne"

When the American movie star John Wayne died in 1979 after a long career, the American poet Louis Phillips commented indirectly on the star's historical significance in "Considering the Death of John Wayne." The poem predates by fourteen years Thomas King's even more daring "consideration" in his novel *Green Grass, Running Water*. In 1974, *CBS News* reported that the "conservative Wayne" had visited the comparatively liberal Harvard University upon invitation from the provocative *Harvard Lampoon*, arriving on an "armoured personnel carrier" offered to him by supporters in the reserves ("John Wayne" n. pag.). Phillips remembers the scene in his poem: "He went to Harvard in a tank / Which is one way to get there" (265). If you remember Wayne's voice, you can hear it in the second of these lines; Phillips here is partly ventriloquizing and partly elegizing Wayne's transition from "tank" to "horse" to the grave. The poem and its historical contexts introduce many of the ideas that preoccupy me in this essay, such as the politics of celebrity and the fascination with dead celebrities. I argue, in fact, that King's vision of John Wayne reframes other Canadian Westerns about Billy the Kid and Jesse James *as a collective fantasy of the death of American celebrity*—or at least as an attempted subversion of American pop-cultural influence. In *Green Grass, Running Water* and other later texts, King articulates his stake in a popular culture that has a pernicious influence on opinions of the First Nations and Native Americans. As King suggests, the problem is that figures such as Wayne spin off out of popular culture into history, or at least into popular conceptions of history, and give the false impression that modern Indigenous culture is an oxymoron; it was *supposed* to have died in the nineteenth century.

Popular culture as a threat bigger than history—that is the concern of this essay, and it is one possible motivation for King's wading into the literary end of popular culture: to question it from within. This essay starts with King's reaction against the nostalgia of the Western in *Green Grass, Running Water*, thereby drawing attention to the role of public personas such as Wayne's in manipulating feelings about history through popular culture. It then compares the publicity and politics of John Wayne to those of "Tom King," partly to reflect on how these men appeal to fans. I call Thomas King "Tom" here and in the title as a reminder of the public persona he developed in the late 1990s on CBC Radio's *Dead Dog Café Comedy Hour* and during his candidacy for a seat in Parliament in 2007-08. In *Green Grass, Running Water*, King is teaching us lessons about popular culture and the publicity of "Indians" that he would develop not only on radio but also through his photographic series of "Native artists in Lone Ranger masks" (qtd. in Christie 76) and in the short film *I'm Not the Indian You Had in Mind*.

Green Grass, Running Water is a well-researched text—thirty-seven studies naming it in their own titles, plus many others identified in Eva Gruber's selected bibliography (331-39)—but, while its John Wayne scenes are often mentioned, neither the Western nor especially Wayne are focal points. These points are retrospectively crucial. Reading King's novel today is different from reading it in 1993, partly because he is now much more widely known, and his major reputation is significant to the novel's theme of celebrity. Furthermore, since King turned his attention to the Western through John Wayne in *Green Grass, Running Water*, we have seen the publication of books that rethink Westerns such as major historical trilogies by both Guy Vanderhaeghe and Fred Stenson, George Bowering's *Shoot!* (1994), Gil Adamson's *The Outlander* (2007), Patrick DeWitt's *The Sisters Brothers* (2011), Sean Johnston's *Listen All You Bullets* (2013), Natalee Caple's *In Calamity's Wake* (2013), Emma Donoghue's *Frog Music* (2014), Nadia Bozak's *El Niño* (2014), and most recently Alix Healey's *All True Not a Lie in It* (2015). In Canada's relatively small literary market, any such coincidence of genre fiction is remarkable. Although the Canadian Western can be traced back at least as far as the novels of Ralph Connor and H. A. Cody in the 1910s, through wartime pulp fiction such as *Dynamic Western* magazine in Toronto, and to occasional examples in CanLit by Michael Ondaatje, bpNichol, and later Paulette Jiles and George Bowering (his *Caprice* 1987), the increased activity surrounding the Western since the 1990s raises the question of historical impetus. Why then, and why now? The answers to these questions

could be a book in themselves, but one hypothesis is that the shift to the right in an era of globalization and neoliberalism, leading to the election in 2006 of the Conservative party under Stephen Harper, prompted reflection on myths of the West and the Western world that manifested itself through the Western. The recent defeat of the Harper government in 2015 seems an opportune moment to return to the book that arguably started the trend.

The Western is a historically engaged and nostalgic genre, but the implicit comparison of the present to the Old West is not often made obvious through framing narratives such as those in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (Ford 1962) and *Back to the Future III* (Zemeckis 1990). The Western tends to bring us close to the action. The framing narrative in *Green Grass, Running Water*, however, creates a distancing effect that also helps King's own readers to avoid the nostalgia so crucial to Westerns. Coincidentally, another book by an Indigenous writer published in 1993 similarly avoids nostalgia; in Sherman Alexie's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, one of the "Indian" characters dreams of being "a gunfighter with braids and a ribbon shirt. He wouldn't speak English, just whisper Spokane as he gunned down Wild Bill Hickok, Bat Masterson, even Billy the Kid. . . . [W]hite and Indian people would sing ballads about him" (232). The nostalgia for an alternative history here suggests that King's fantasy about the death of American celebrity is not simply a "Canadian" affair; it is a concern other Indigenous writers have about the pop culture of the Western. Conventionalized through repetition of narrative and trope, the genre encourages us to appreciate rather than critique nostalgia. When generic conventions are repeated but not challenged, they enable fictional representations to support real-life ideology—a slippage from illusion to reality. Such a slippage is like the biographical fallacy of assuming that the character is like the actor. *Green Grass, Running Water* treats John Wayne distantly, as the Other, refusing to personalize or historicize the man behind the persona. To do so might be to create sympathy in readers and to individualize a key problem of the Western genre: the idolization of gunfighters and the related nostalgia for their passing. Correspondingly, in *I'm Not the Indian You Had in Mind*, King considers "this Indian you idolize" to be the detrimentally kitschy idol of a cigar-store "Indian," an equally problematic figure because of nostalgia for "the vanishing Indian" instead of support for contemporary Indigenous cultures. The nostalgia encourages overly selective memories and distorted histories. In *Screening the Past: Memory and Nostalgia in Cinema* (2005), Pam Cook argues

that "the distinction between nostalgia, memory and history has become blurred" (3), and that "nostalgia is generally associated with fantasy" (3). She prefers to see history, memory, and nostalgia as a "continuum" (3) on which memory partly validates nostalgia so that it is not dismissed as inauthentic or fantastic. King would probably agree with her in that respect. Indeed, one reason why he disavows nostalgia might be to reduce its effect on notions of history. Another is the likelihood that nostalgia in the Western tends to be imperialistic (Abel 87), and that the West now needs to be won "from the shady forces of illusion and fantasy" (Evans 408). Although David H. Evans argues that such "forces" are to some extent straw men in other revisionist Westerns (408), I find few replications of the problems of the Western in *Green Grass, Running Water*. By refusing to treat John Wayne nostalgically through history or pseudo-history, but rather through a genuinely *alternative* fantasy (I mean as a subversive construction), King minimizes the effect of generic star power on his readers, though some of his Western-watching characters (most importantly Lionel) are under that influence.

When King fantasizes about the death of John Wayne in the novel, he is interfering less with the man born Marion Morrison and more with his persona—which is, in fact, as much a *type* as it is a *trope* that appears often in narratives of stardom. To want to see a celebrity knocked off his high horse is a cliché of popular culture that partly explains the popularity of rise-and-fall narratives. Consider the recent film *Birdman* (Iñárritu 2014), the exemplary *Sunset Boulevard* (Wilder 1950), and of course some of the nine films in which the John Wayne character dies, perhaps most importantly *The Shootist* (Siegel 1976), the last of his career. In the latter examples, the star is a synecdoche for an era, and the narrative comments on history. At other times, the star is allegorical, standing in for a morally charged historical figure, as is the case in *Citizen Kane* (Wells 1941). The problem is that history and popular culture are not separate, nor are the person and persona as neatly divisible as even the stars themselves might hope: *The Shootist* refers semi-autobiographically to the imminent death of the actual man. When celebrities perform deaths while their own deaths are imminent, Thomas H. Kane calls it "automortography" (410) and argues that it is a form of self-promotion that enables stars to set some of the terms of memorialization. It is what some people do when they know that their compulsively followed dramas as celebrities—as public personas—give them the status of historical figures too.

John Wayne had this historical status, and it is almost certainly one of the main reasons that King chose to kill him fictionally at the direction of

the four shape-shifting "Indians" in a movie—a magic realist reversal of the usual fate when cowboys meet "Indians" in Westerns. King could have chosen to re-enact the scene of George Armstrong Custer's death at the Battle of the Little Bighorn, as in the movie *Little Big Man* (Penn 1970), but he chose to kill Wayne. He acknowledges Wayne's historical significance as a public persona when he alludes to how John Wayne movies might have been marketed to kids (214) and refers to real John Wayne movies such as *Stagecoach, Hondo*, and *The Searchers* (Ford 1939; Farrow 1953; Ford 1956). In his work on King, Brian Johnson is wary of "collaps[ing] history into geography" (30), and in parallel I am wary of collapsing history into popular culture. For the character Professor Alberta Frank in *Green Grass, Running Water*, "[t]eaching Western history was trial enough without having to watch what the movie makers had made out of it" (214). Partly because of the depiction of the movie within the novel, Johnson calls for more critical attention to the mass media in *Green Grass, Running Water*, as it "is most explicitly engaged in questioning the effects of Western technology and electric media on Native subjectivity and culture" (n. pag.). In 2012, King wrote in his non-fictional book *The Inconvenient Indian* that "film, in all its forms, has been the only place where most North Americans have seen Indians" (xv). That he chose to rewrite the ending of a fictional movie starring Wayne suggests that non-Native popular culture is one of the real enemies of Native American and First Nations cultures, partly because it influences how we understand history and can even be mistaken for history.

John Wayne's public political stance is also a potential reason that King has been critical of him. Wayne was a Republican "supporter of Joe McCarthy, Richard Nixon, and the Vietnam War" (Newman 158) and "came to symbolize hard-line conservative politics of the 1960s and 1970s" (Meeuf 2), thereby polarizing his reception, according to Meeuf, as "a necessary but benevolent patriarchal and national authority, or . . . a racist, sexist totalitarian who represented all of U.S. culture's oppressive past" (2). Although Wayne himself could be open to being lampooned, Wayne's persona could be as hard and even "indomitable" (Wills 17) as the tank that Phillips relates to him in the poem that opens this essay. Nearer to the liberal end of the spectrum, Thomas King ran as "Tom King" in 2007 as a candidate in the New Democratic Party, which was once a socialist party and is now left-leaning but centrist. His political orientation is in many ways opposite to that which Wayne appears to "symbolize" on the political spectrum, and he presumably sees

Wayne or his persona as a cowboy in something other than the white hat that conventionally identifies "the good guy" in many Westerns.

The differing views of Wayne, however, are not as racialized as one might expect in the context of King, a writer of Cherokee, Greek, and Swiss-German descent who has, in his books *The Truth about Stories* and *The Inconvenient Indian*, often reflected very self-consciously on the racial politics related to his Native heritage. Greg Bechtel argues that most critics are "reductive" (205) in their interpretations of *Green Grass, Running Water* and perpetuate a "'Whites' versus 'Indians'" (206) mentality that does not perfectly reflect a novel in which, for example, some of the enemies of "Indians" are people who could identify as "Indian." And the novel arrived around the same time as JoEllen Shively's 1992 study of Native American and white viewers' responses to *The Searchers,* which revealed that many Indigenous people really like John Wayne movies, especially Wayne's "toughness" (731) in them; they don't interpret it as "totalitarian." King's character Eli Stands Alone in *Green Grass, Running Water* also thinks "he liked Westerns. It was like . . . eating potato chips. They weren't good for you, but no one said they were" (163). In contrast with the study done on the reservation, Shively's pre-test with Native American college students revealed that her viewers did not like John Wayne and associated his character with interview-based comments they perceived as racist (732). Illustrating some of this real-life complexity in fiction, *Smoke Signals* (Eyre 1998), the adaptation of Alexie's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, includes some people from the reservation who mock but also grudgingly respect Wayne. Some of Alexie's and King's characters know how appealing Wayne can be; others are either ambivalent or, in the case of the warriors in *Green Grass, Running Water*, willing to do much more violence than duke it out with him.

While Eli is circumspect about the Western's appeal, his nephew Lionel Red Dog is enthusiastic about John Wayne. One of the main characters in *Green Grass, Running Water*, Lionel is a TV salesman whose aunt Norma tells him, "I would sometimes think you were white" (7). Among scholars, Johnson states that Lionel is "complicit in his own oppression" (39), and Dee Horne calls him a "mimic" (268). Lionel identifies with Wayne, as fans often do with movie stars. Contrary to his cousin Charlie Looking Bear's depiction of Wayne as a reprehensible killer, Lionel—at the even younger age of six—"knew what he wanted to be. John Wayne. Not the actor, but the character. Not the man, but the hero. . . . The John Wayne who saved stagecoaches and wagon trains from Indian attacks" (241). Lionel's father suggests that he

"keep his options open": "We got a lot of famous men and women, too. Warriors, chiefs, councillors, diplomats, spiritual leaders, healers" (241). But as a child Lionel is set on John Wayne, partly because he has been convinced by advertising aimed at children; King writes that "[o]ne of the cereal companies offered a free John Wayne ring for three boxtops and fifty cents handling charge" (214). Later in life, however, Lionel gets a fringed leather jacket from four tricksters on his birthday that makes him "look a little like John Wayne" (303)—though Wayne's comparatively realistic costuming means that "John Wayne" here signifies any generic cowboy. Lionel himself thinks he looks less like his uncle Portland Looking Bear and "more like John Wayne" (318). At one point, Lionel makes the healthy decision of walking to work instead of driving: "it would be a good way to start the day, a good way to start his new life. . . . That's what John Wayne would do" (243).

The irony of this "good way" is that King seems to recognize a positive aspect of fandom here, but in the movie to which he alludes—1953's *Hondo*—Wayne is not a very positive influence. In *Hondo*, "a good way" is a catch phrase of the main character, Hondo, played by Wayne. Hondo embodies traditionally American and libertarian values such as self-reliance, that Emersonian ideal of most Westerns; but Hondo's ethics are suspect, and his admiration of self-reliant beings requires explanation only in circumstances involving the dog Sam and the Apache people. When Angie (Geraldine Page) wants to feed his dog, Sam, he refuses because he is proud of the dog's self-reliance; when she offers Hondo the food for Sam, he says, "No ma'am. I don't feed him either. Sam's independent. I want him to stay that way. It's a good way."[1] Midway through the film, the Apache kill Sam, but we never see Hondo show grief. Much later, as the pursuing Apache are repelled and the pursued whites comment on the near-imminent arrival of major reinforcements for the cavalry, Hondo's old friend Buffalo Baker (Ward Bond) says, "That'll be the end of the Apache." "Yeah," says Hondo, typically stoic. "The end of a way of life. Too bad. It's a good way." Hondo seems to have character here; Robert Pippin speculates that Wayne is so effective at portraying "great integrity" (243) that most viewers ignore his persona's racism. The repetition of Hondo's catch phrase means he *is* comparing the people and the dog. This comparison might not be so negative given his stated respect for both, but—epitomizing so many North American and Western attitudes—he is nostalgic, not remorseful.

Probably only King, in his humorist guise, would try to find something funny in this scene, if in fact he was thinking of it while writing *Green Grass,*

Running Water. In his novel, King introduces the Dead Dog Café (108), which he later parlayed into CBC Radio's *Dead Dog Café Comedy Hour*, which ran to eighty-five episodes between 1997 and 2000. Michael Enright describes the series as "irreverent, political and sometimes breathtakingly politically incorrect. And funny" (*Dead Dog*). Arnold E. Davidson, Priscilla L. Walton, and Jennifer Andrews describe it in *Border Crossings: Thomas King's Cultural Inversions* as "a show that deliberately highlights the ludicrousness of clinging to reductive racial stereotypes that don't allow for alternatives" (112). On the show, King plays himself, Tom, alongside characters Jasper Friendly Bear (Floyd Favel) and Gracie Heavyhand (Edna Rain). Jasper is a friend while Gracie manages the café-cum-broadcasting studio. One of the show's running jokes is that Louis Riel would appear as a special guest (e.g., as "a famous Indian" in the first episode); however, its *infamous* joke is that the café serves puppy stew. In the second episode, Tom worries about Gracie's plans to "butcher a puppy on a radio show" (*Dead Dog*)[2] and she relativizes about eating one kind of meat and not another. The joke cannot be separated from the show's commentary on the Western; Gracie also relativizes about sentencing in the criminal justice system in the "Trust Tonto" segment of the show, which Jasper introduces by playing some cavalry music. Jasper claims that the Lone Ranger cannot be trusted because he is a white man in a mask, a man who rides around the West to make the world "safe for democracy and multinational corporations" (*Dead Dog*). Speaking for Tonto, Gracie then remarks on a problem common throughout North America: that "natives get tougher sentences for the same crimes as whites" (*Dead Dog*) and outnumber whites in prison. In this context, Jasper asserts again that Louis Riel is alive, indirectly raising the question of the fairness of Riel's death sentence in 1885 following the Northwest Rebellion. King alludes to dead dogs to criticize the low value placed by the government and by Hollywood on the lives of the First Nations and Native Americans—and, in fact, their dehumanization. King's purpose is to accentuate relative harms, as he does by comparing figures and arguing in *The Inconvenient Indian* that "Whites were considerably more successful at massacre than Indians" (5). Not funny—but nothing Western is sacred for King. The image of the dead dog might also be meaningful beyond the Western and into the Western world in general, because it can be associated with the one from Coyote's dream in *Green Grass, Running Water*, which Faye Hammill describes succinctly: "One of Coyote's dreams is about a dog, but the dream gets loose, reverses its name, and proclaims itself GOD" (1).

The controversies and hijinks of *The Dead Dog Café Comedy Hour* helped King to establish a degree of celebrity in the mass media, and this celebrity is theoretically a type of power that might be used against the ghost of John Wayne—or, more accurately, the longevity of Wayne's persona and views. *The Dead Dog Café* had an "average weekly audience of nearly one hundred thousand CBC listeners" (Flaherty 313). As Davidson, Walton, and Andrews argue, King's popularity is partly the result of his challenges to the American-Canadian border (11, 13), and to the accessibility of his work beyond "the book-buying public" (97). The fictional killing of John Wayne is one such challenge to borders. A related challenge is broadcasting, which crosses borders almost by definition. King writes in *The Truth about Stories* (2003) that "instead of waiting for you [non-Indians] to come to us, as we have in the past, written literature has allowed us [Indians] to come to you" (114). Radio and other mass media extend this rapprochement. Although "[t]he elevation to celebrity status for King's Native characters [such as Portland in *Green Grass, Running Water*] requires the submission to commodity status" (Rodness n. pag.), and although King himself has had to resist being stereotyped as Cherokee, American, or Canadian in interviews, the mass media are, it seems, for King an opportunity to influence culture. Johnson explains that "*The Dead Dog Café* not only affords King the opportunity to parody and contest stereotypical representations of Natives for a mass popular audience, it also enables him to do so orally, and thus to revitalize and reinvent oral traditions in a non-traditional medium" (44). King uses the mass media to be simultaneously creative, resistant, comic, and self-promotional.

Davidson, Walton, and Andrews add that "King himself is a newsworthy figure, who does not simply write books, but also is a frequent presence on radio programs, an occasional actor, and a sometimes critic" (76-77). His connection to the "mass public audience" and his status as a public intellectual (for instance in his 2003 Massey lectures, which became *The Truth about Stories*) mean that he has a status that can resist celebrity on his own terms—not as an entertainer among those who "ceased being a people and somehow became performers in an Aboriginal minstrel show for White North America" (*Truth about Stories* 68). He writes in *The Inconvenient Indian* about the "public face" (153) of the American Indian Movement, recognizing the disproportionate effect of publicity on the public's understanding of which movements are influential. In the context of his own activism, King jokes that "Hollywood might even make a movie about us. I wonder who they'd

get to play me" (*Inconvenient* 144). Although he is the underdog in a metaphoric battle against John Wayne and was not yet a celebrity in 1993, he now has star power to fight star power—fire with fire—at least in Canada.

King doesn't apologize, either, when he kills John Wayne in the novel. For someone who campaigned for an erstwhile socialist party in Canada, he is remarkably conservative in the retributive justice at the moment when magic realism meets realism in this novel—quite different from in the realist sections, where his First Nations characters refuse to engage in violence. Let me set the stage, which is "Buffalo" Bill Bursum's audio-video store, where Lionel's cousin Charlie has come to talk about jobs and money; Bursum is playing the John Wayne movie on his wall of televisions, the TVs set up to look like a map of the country. Throughout the novel the only program on TV is this very Western (177, 220), a fictional movie called *The Mysterious Warrior* which Bursum thinks of as "[t]he best Western of them all. John Wayne, Richard Widmark, Maureen O'Hara. All the biggies" (188). The realist and magic realist sections of the novel finally combine when a "group of shape-shifting Indigenous deities" enter into *The Mysterious Warrior* and act out an alternate ending. These deities name themselves after characters in "imperial master-narratives" (Davidson, Walton, and Andrews 88) that have race as a major theme: Hawkeye, Ishmael, Robinson Crusoe, and the Lone Ranger—all characters "paired with indigenous, colonized sidekicks" (Wyile 115). Incidentally, Hawkeye and the Lone Ranger affirm Bill's opinion by saying, rather too innocently, it's also their "favorite" (302) movie. King bases the movie on a fictional novel mentioned in this very novel in which a "stagecoach was attacked by Indians led by the most notorious Indian in the territory, the Mysterious Warrior" (162), a warrior who kidnaps a young woman from the stagecoach. The plot echoes John Wayne films such as *Stagecoach* and *The Searchers*. Whereas the battle scenes of these real movies are grim indeed, in *The Mysterious Warrior* "Hawkeye, Ishmael, Robinson Crusoe, and the Lone Ranger [are] smiling and laughing and waving their lances as the rest of the Indians flashed across the river to where the soldiers lay cowering behind some logs" (221). King's vengeance against the American soldiers is joyful here, not in the slightest remorseful—and why should it be, given that the historical reality of oppression is much worse than the fantasy of surviving it intact?

The death scene's joyfulness dissipates quickly, however. Initially embarrassed to see his father, fictional B-movie star Portland Looking Bear, on screen and about to lose to John Wayne, Charlie starts to identify with him as it becomes

apparent that the four deities have "fixed" (317) the movie. They do so by erasing the cavalry that came to the rescue of Wayne and his party: "There at full charge, hundreds of soldiers in bright blue uniforms with gold buttons and sashes and stripes, blue-eyed and rosy-cheeked, came over the last rise. And disappeared. Just like that" (321). (The inverse appears in King's 1999 novel *Truth & Bright Water* when the artist Monroe Swimmer implies that he dealt with the erasure of Indians from the landscape by painting them back into classic images.[3]) Outnumbered and missing with most shots, John Wayne loses the fight: "John Wayne looked down and stared stupidly at the arrow in his thigh, shaking his head in amazement and disbelief as two bullets ripped through his chest and out the back of his jacket. . . . And then the movie ended and the credits rolled to black and all the screens ran to static" (322). Charlie's intense reaction—"Get 'em, Dad" (322)—is cathartic, a vicarious release of his frustrations with the popular culture of the Western that costumed his father in "a large rubber nose" (217) to suit a stereotype and directed him to perform his own defeat in Western after Western. As Herb Wyile observes, King turns some white men into literalized "cartoon characters" (120) as a revenge against Native stereotyping in the form of Portland with his "rubber nose." And the fantasy is not only as if the Indians had beaten back and humiliated the colonists. It is also as if the Indians had finally been represented as succeeding—no "tragedy or doom" (Cox 220). Charlie is a successful lawyer but realizes that he, like his father, had to sell out for success. Although Lionel registers vague apprehension when his idol dies (322), he later renews his affiliations with his Blackfoot family by going to a Sun Dance. The alternate ending of *The Mysterious Warrior* seems to inspire Lionel to be more involved in tradition, but he does not return to pre-colonial, pre-modern Indigenous ways. Shively argues that "[w]hat makes Westerns meaningful to Indians is the fantasy of being free and independent like the cowboy and the familiarity of the landscape or setting" (729), whereas non-Indigenous people enjoy Westerns as "primitive myths" (729) that affirm that colonization was good. King disputes the historical validity of the "myths" and *partly* aligns with Indigenous viewers who want their "fantasy."

King insistently repeats that a major problem in the majority population's view of First Nations and Native Americans is that the "Indian" remains a "primitive" figure—never a modern and complex figure but a singular reductive figure "trapped in a state of stasis" (*Inconvenient* 78). The alternate ending of *The Mysterious Warrior* represents King's entry into the world of film and of mass media, an entry that is not only his; it is also a communal

entry for Lionel, Charlie, and their relations, giving credence to Johnson's claim that "King . . . remains cautiously optimistic that, like the book, electric mass media can . . . accurately reflect divergent cultural perspectives" (43). Active in the mass media such as the Internet, the hundreds of Indigenous nations in North America could add perspective to the problematic view by sidestepping the cultural gatekeepers of Hollywood movies, as Alexie does with *Smoke Signals*.

Andrews and Walton explain that "[t]he counter-narratives or alternative visions within King's texts also perform a political purpose," which is "cultural resistance to the dominance of nation" (609); elsewhere, they call these narratives "alterna(rra)tives" (Davidson, Walton, and Andrews 87). Despite King's justified resistance to this "dominance," and "the larger issue of the uneasy place of Native writers in 'Canadian' culture" (Wyile 122), I want to conclude by thinking about how the death of John Wayne in *Green Grass, Running Water* encourages Canadians to read American Westerns. Admittedly, these national categories are impositions on King; he writes in his book *The Truth about Stories* that "the border doesn't mean that much to the majority of Native people in either country. It is, after all, a figment of someone else's imagination" (102). It is also likely that he knew he was writing his novel at a time when "many Americans [had recently] been surprised and hurt by reports in the media of or by personally experiencing anti-Americanism on the part of Canadians" (Daniels 87). Whether or not Americans and Canadians generally interpret King as Canadian, university teachers in Canada have Canadianized *Green Grass, Running Water* such that it is the second-most popular text by an Indigenous writer in Canadian literature courses (Fagan and McKegney 36).[4] He could not have been ignorant of the national-political risk of his novel, and in fact he might also have foreseen that its "Canadian" objection to American influence would prompt self-reflective readers to consider the parallel of First Nations' objections to Canadian influence.

Re-reading for American historical figures in the few Canadian Westerns published after the Canadian Centennial in 1967 but before *Green Grass, Running Water* in 1993, I note that the American—the main character—is always killed. There are only three that I know of at the time of writing (the true resurgence of the Western coming after King): Michael Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970), bpNichol's *The True Eventual Story of Billy the Kid* (1970), and Paulette Jiles' *Jesse James Poems* (1988). Although three is a small number and would be dwarfed by the number of American

publications that focus on the death of an American historical figure (John Wayne being a parallel historical figure because of the influence of his persona on popular understandings of history, as I have been arguing), in the comparatively small field of Canadian literary production it is notable. The scene of the warriors killing John Wayne in *Green Grass, Running Water* also makes me wonder if the Western in Canada can teach us something about the interest in dead celebrities in the work of Canadian poets such as Ondaatje, Gwendolyn MacEwen, and Irving Layton, as I have discussed elsewhere (Deshaye n. pag.). For Layton and Ondaatje, the examples are almost always American; many of their texts were published in the 1970s when nationalistic feeling was strong in Canada, which partly accounts for the concern about American cultural imperialism or fears of neo-colonialism. I argue that the Canadian books that focus so much on American cultural figures like Jesse James, Billy the Kid, and John Wayne are part of a general commentary on American-Canadian relations, not only a generic precedent.

Because such figures are not purely fictional, the earlier works are often read as metahistorical. King's novel, however, encourages us to read the texts as critiques of popular culture rather than as revisionist histories. I asserted earlier that King recontextualizes the killings of Billy the Kid and Jesse James in Canadian Westerns as a collective fantasy of the death of American celebrity. The killing of John Wayne in *Green Grass, Running Water* is hardly the restorative justice of the stereotypical leftist Canadian way; it is retributive—but *creative, fantastic,* not *real* retribution. King recognizes John Wayne and the American Western as pop-cultural factors in a representational stigma that perpetuates historical losses. Partly through King, the American Western in Canadian literature is re-written to adjust popular culture's negative effect on history, ultimately to encourage "Indians" not to leave it to the cowboys.

NOTES

1 Dialogue from *Hondo* has been transcribed by the author.
2 Dialogue from *The Dead Dog Café Comedy Hour* has been transcribed by the author.
3 Monroe's tongue-in-cheek explanation appears on p. 137-38.
4 More recent but selective data from the *Open Syllabus Project* suggest it is #1.

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