

Thomas King's National Literary Celebrity and the Cultural Ambassadorship of a Native Canadian Writer

I'd done quite a bit of work under Thomas King
—Thomas King

The recent publication of Thomas King's *The Inconvenient Indian* (2012) offers scholars of King's literary career, and of Aboriginal literature, an opportunity to revisit King's concerns about Indigenous celebrity and public visibility. His studied management of his own visibility as an Aboriginal writer, artist, and filmmaker in Canada underscores a literary persona in that text that offers an intimate view of the reclusive process of writing and the direct influences of his wife and son on his literary production. King's hospitable posture adopted in the earliest pages of *The Inconvenient Indian* reverberates, however spectrally, in later chapters where he explores the legacy of Native participation and representation in cinema and literature. These concerns are a continuation of those explored in his much studied novel *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993), where he both diagnoses patterns of Native representation in Hollywood and tests, as I will argue, his own role as a Native literary celebrity in Canada. King does not address the uneasy space he occupies as a Native celebrity writing about Native celebrity directly in these texts, nor what he considers to be the interpenetration of the type of national acclaim that frames his career in Canada and that which frames the actors and performers he discusses. However, his interviews and public appearances are riven with an acute and self-reflexive understanding of a dimension of his career that cannot escape comparison to the legacy of colonial visibility that has long attended the public lives of Native individuals.

My concern in this paper is the deployment of King's indigeneity and his multinational identity as what Laura Moss (2006) has referred to, in the context of a discussion about Margaret Atwood, as a "cultural ambassador" of the nation (20). Moss claims that literary celebrities are frequently enlisted by the public and by the government to serve as delegates of culture at home and abroad. As a multiracial American-born Cherokee living and working in Canada with Canadian citizenship, King can be exported as an index of Canadian multiculturalism. However, as someone who calls the Canada-US border a "line from somebody else's imagination" (qtd. in Davidson, Walton, and Andrews 13), King also denies the very boundaries that he is assumed to both embody and transcend.

By examining the national features of King's literary celebrity we glimpse an increasingly complex, seemingly contradictory, picture of cultural ambassadorship in Canada. If, as Moss argues, the cultural ambassador is a branding icon entrusted with selling cultural goods as well as symbolic capital at home and abroad (21), then these interests support and are supported by individuals like King, who may deploy divergent opinions about the national space, to the extent that they may even reject the legitimacy of the nation they are poised to represent, as long as their efforts come back to the nation in the form of financial and cultural capital. Further, as we see with King, cultural ambassadorship is not simply a role conferred and managed exclusively by media institutions outside of and away from the individual and his or her interests; cultural ambassadorship is a mode of celebrity in which the individual is a key player. It is a role that the individual takes part in moulding both in ways that affirm and resist the national interests and the platforms that support it. The national consecration of culture is an intricate activity that frequently produces and involves resistant cultural artifacts as legitimating products. King's refutation of the Canada-US border enables his celebrity status by reinforcing images of Canadian inclusivity even in the moment that he denies the parameters that make possible that national identification. Further, his tight, long-standing relationship with the CBC ensures that even his rejection of the legitimacy of the Canada-US border can be transformed into national capital.

In this paper I consider related phenomena to describe King's public life, including "celebrity," "literary celebrity," "cultural ambassador," "public intellectual," and "canonical author." These subjectivities overlap and diverge depending on the venue in which King is received. As I will discuss shortly, King is hailed as a range of subjects across his public appearances

and commitments. Consequently, the mode in which his visibility is made intelligible shifts according to the interests at play. For an academic interviewer he is a public intellectual; for a university instructor he is a canonical author. These roles have a cumulative effect in what I call, after Lorraine York, King's "literary celebrity," which names a combination of public and private investments in an author that are primarily, but not exclusively, derived from his or her literary output.

Although I am chiefly concerned with King's reception within Canada, Moss' observation of the "paradox of transnational-nationalism" reflects the national discourse in which King is frequently involved. If transnationalism is the "flow of people, ideas, goods, and capital, across national territory, [which] undermines nationality and nationalism as discrete categories of identification, economic organization, and political constitution" (Braziel and Mannur, qtd. in Moss 22-3), then transnationalism, she writes, "paradoxically . . . relies precisely on the designation of individuals, often well-known cultural figures, to represent the nation categorically beyond its borders" (23). King has had a wide reception outside of Canada and the United States. The most recent collection of scholarly essays on King, Eva Gruber's *Thomas King: Works and Impact* (2012), reflects the international interest in his work. The tongue-in-cheek photograph on the volume's cover—King mimicking the outward-looking gaze of a kitschy Indian figurine—suggests that King is gazing back at those scholars beyond the borders his work has breached. Transnationalism is established through the means of cultural production, as it traffics both in authors like King and commodities like the figurine. King's globalizing reach should also serve to remind us that as an Aboriginal writer allied with First Nations north of the forty-ninth parallel, he has always produced and performed his work within a transnational context.

King has been a visible presence on the Canadian literary scene since the late 1980s. He has edited two volumes of Native literature in Canada; his first novel, *Medicine River* (1989), received a number of awards and was adapted into a film in 1993; he was shortlisted for the 1991 Commonwealth Writer's Prize; he has been nominated twice for the Governor General's Award; he created and hosted the popular CBC radio series *Dead Dog Café*; he delivered the CBC Massey Lectures in 2003; the publication of the Lectures, *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative* (2003), received the Trillium Award in 2003; he was inducted into the Order of Canada in 2004; and his work has been featured on CBC's Canada Reads. In recent years

he has written, directed, and starred in a short film, *I'm Not the Indian You Had in Mind* (2007), and run for federal office as a candidate for the New Democratic Party in Guelph, Ontario.¹ Although he has never been called a literary celebrity in the press,² King certainly has the trappings of a well-regarded and beloved Canadian writer. He is known, specifically, as a Native writer who thematizes Native politics, figures, and stories in his work. Born of Cherokee and Swiss-Greek descent in the United States, King's Canadian national image rests on a nervously multivalent identity that includes Cherokee descent, Canadian citizenship, American citizenship, and First Nations communities on both sides of the forty-ninth parallel. In a 1999 interview with literary critics Margery Fee and Sneja Gunew, he says,

When I go on book tours, it's the damndest thing. It's like I have to figure out who they are and what they want and then I have to see if I can strike that pose, or if I want to strike that pose. So you say, "Well, here with Tom King, a Cherokee writer." "Hi, I'm Cherokee. I'm Tom King." Or, "Here we are with Canadian writer Thomas King." "Yeah, I'm Canadian, eh?" (n. pag.)

King articulates how he contributes to a made-to-order public image that conforms to celebrity theorist Richard Dyer's theory of "constructed polysemy" (*Stars* 3), in which celebrity figures are characterized by "the finite multiplicity of meanings and affects they embody and the attempt so to structure them that some meanings and affects are foregrounded and others are masked or displaced" (3). In this book tour, King's literary identity is multiplied along the fault lines of nation and race to make him legible to different reading demographics. Indeed, Arnold E. Davidson, Priscilla L. Walton, and Jennifer Andrews suggest that King's popularity cannot be adduced *solely* to a question of literary merit, but is routed through his identification with both sides of the Canada-US border, as well as the thematization of this border in his fiction (11).

King's celebrity status is indexed by a range of national signifiers. He was called "Canada's best storyteller" (George 50) by the former leader of the NDP, the late Jack Layton. He has also been called a "Native American Kurt Vonnegut" (Weaver 55). Reviewers tend to associate King with his pan-tribal trickster characters. For instance, Diane Turbide from *Maclean's* calls him a "literary trickster" because, like Coyote, "he is busy creating fictional worlds" (43) and he "maintains a light, mischievous touch" in his work (43). King's literary style has even been compared to his national background. Janne Korkka claims that his works "appear highly hybridized, and so does the author himself" (144). Because of his transnational background, critics in Canada and the US often claim him categorically as their own.

In interviews, King is frequently asked how his identity contributes to his writing and his public reception. In the interview with Fee and Gunew, Fee tries to locate King's identity with what Dyer (1991) would call a "deconstructive" gaze (132). The interviewer explains that for her project on public intellectuals in Canada and Australia, King is perfect because, "you're both an immigrant in a way and an Aboriginal as well. You see, in our project we're dealing with people who are in a sense diasporic, and also people who are indigenous in both Canada and Australia. You're a multiple category in your own person, which I like a lot." To which King responds, "Only if you believe in national lines." The interview continues:

MF: I mean, you may not believe in the Canadian border, but in a sense you are an American immigrant in one aspect of yourself.

TK: Politically that's true.

MF: And I think you've probably had people react to you that way whether you believe it or not.

TK: Yes.

MF: I'd like maybe to ask you to talk about the politics of being American in Canada, being Canadian in the States (when you're back), and possibly being Cherokee in First Nations communities.

TK: Or wherever. (n. pag.)

King's responses betray a sense of uneasiness that Lorraine York (2007) has argued is a condition of literary celebrity, particularly one resting on an interest in the writer's citizenship (4). "If celebrity," she claims, "marks the uneasy space wherein the single, special individual and the group demographic both meet and separate, then citizenship, as a condition wherein the individual and the group mutually define each other, is a prime expression of that uneasy space" (5). The uneasy tone of the interview with Fee represents that shared space in which identity labels signal the failure of mutual definition. The labels conducive to the interviewer seem excessive and exclusive as modes of relating his experiences to his readership. King once again dances around easy answers to any of Fee's questions. The recombination of labels ("both an immigrant and an Aboriginal") suggests just how inoperable they are, even as she tries to show that they can be contiguous. Indeed, the comedy of these many labels and their juxtaposition derives precisely from their opacity as living relics of a national censorial imagination.

As the interview proceeds, we see that even as the identity labels work discursively to manage King's public appearances King rejects such management:

With me it's sort of like, "We don't need the Cherokee anymore, let's find an American. Oh my God, he's an American. Leave him in the corner there." . . . [T]hey'll say, "Well, how does it feel to be an American in Canada?" And I'll say, "Well, I'm a Canadian, you know. I've got citizenship." "Really. But you're still an American, right?" "Well, yeah, but I'm Cherokee, too." "What's that got to do with anything?" they'll say. "Well, you know, I guess it doesn't for this show, but the next one I'm going to be on. . . ." (n.pag.)

For media industries, King's identity quickly becomes a case of the convenient—or inconvenient—Indian. The language of this passage strikingly forecasts the observation in *The Inconvenient Indian* that Indian populations were dispossessed of their land and scuttled from place to place, and continue to be subjected to surveillance, management, and administration "like furniture" (82). The media's clumsy shuffling of the star Indian between various "corners" of national investment gestures to the fledgling biopolitical regimes under which Aboriginal populations were controlled, and reterritorializes that vocabulary as an expression of the cultural marketplace in which King's celebrity is managed with increasing intensity. King's provocative argument in *The Inconvenient Indian* that, "when we look at Native-non-Native relations, there is no great difference between the past and the present" (xv), suggests that the domain of cultural production cannot be considered outside of a continuous relationship with the history of dispossession.

But while Indigenous celebrity is typically defined in Indigenous studies as a mode of injury wholly complicit with this history, (Daniel Francis [1992] argues that "the defining characteristic of the celebrity Indian is that he or she be selected by non-Natives" [142]), the example of King's literary celebrity tells a much more intricate story about the conditions of Native visibility. Fee avoids the connotative injury of "celebrity" by classifying King as a public intellectual, a title he most certainly deserves. In this subsequent study of King's public engagements, I have deployed a vocabulary of celebrity in a strategic effort to foreground King's institutional investments, the public interest in King's personal life, and the desire to locate the author in the folds of his productions. After York, I define literary celebrity not as a cult of the individual—an ideology of which Indigenous communities may be more suspicious—but as an ambiguous site of negotiation that marks the convergence of a diverse set of interests.

In addition to his identification with his more visible works, King's self-positioning as the "Indian you didn't have in mind" is one of his more enduring and agented public avatars. From his short film, *I'm Not The Indian You Had*

In Mind, this self-assigned image is a shorthand for the many “Live Indians”³ that have not been included in what counts as representable indigeneity and that indexes the indifferent space of the individual and group identity. As one of three actors who speak these eight words in the film, King gives an account of himself that does not belong to him alone. The narrative King tells in the film about the absent father and the daughter with FAS (fetal alcohol syndrome) begs comparison to what we know of King’s biography,⁴ but as part of this pedagogical assemblage, is shown to resist private ownership and to circulate, as stories do, in a wider communal context.

King’s engagement with non-Native audiences also reveals his keen understanding of the stakes of public visibility. In *The Truth About Stories*, King discusses literature as a site of negotiation between Native peoples and the nation-state. He comments on the difference between oral and written literature: “instead of waiting for you to come to us, as we have in the past, written literature has allowed us to come to you” (114). His apprehension of written literature as a vehicle for Native activists to engage Canadians on the terms of both Indigenous and non-Native Canadians suggests to me how he continues to maintain a devoted audience within Canada. While he is in no way uncritical of colonial politics, King envisions cultural divides and reaches across them, making certain interests legible to a non-Native audience as he controls access in-between. King is wary about the benefits for Native peoples that have come from this supposedly mutually beneficial bridging (114-15), and he quickly notes the efforts of other well-known Native Canadian authors who have written literature exclusively for Native communities. But his positing of an “us” communicating with a “you”—in both *Stories* and *I’m Not The Indian You Had In Mind*—puts him in a position to be received as the Native informant that in other venues he consciously resists. The three repeating voices in *I’m Not The Indian You Had In Mind* is one form of resistance to this positioning.

King’s stance on the value of literature as a point of mediation with non-Native peoples in *Stories* is evidence of an evolving stance on the topic that has undergone significant reform since the publication of *Green Grass*. In a 1993 interview with Jace Weaver, he says, “I really don’t care about the white audience. . . . They don’t have an understanding of the intricacies of Native life, and I don’t think they’re much interested in it, quite frankly” (qtd. in Weaver 56). On the one hand, the splintering of these two approaches in different venues suggests how King exploits Dyer’s “constructed polysemy” in his public life. On the other hand, King’s increasing exposure to a non-Native

reading public as a popular author in the years following 1993 must have given him cause to reflect on this relatively privileged position and the possibilities for engagement that it opened. As an effect of this position, King has had to negotiate the demand to play the “Native informant” that Timothy Brennan argues is the fraught site of literary celebrity. “[T]he political correctness debate itself,” he writes, “in its distinction between phony and real third-world literature . . . allows one to discuss the issue of celebrity making in the literary field as an issue about native informants” (41).⁵ Brennan locates the politics of the Native informant in literature within a larger trend towards cosmopolitanism in the West; the job of the star author is to create phantasms of their society that the colonial audience already expects to see. A large part of King’s continued national success, I argue, reflects the degree to which he has been received in this role. By refusing to rehash images of the “Dead Indians” that saturate North American popular culture, King meets the skin-deep liberal demand for “real” images of Native life. As the purveyor of images of “Live Indians,” even his critique of colonial representation can be construed as an overture of special insight into Native life.

King is also associated with a particular portion of his oeuvre. Although one of the staples of his artistic career is arguably his experimentation with genre,⁶ King’s literary fiction and historical prose are often foregrounded while his genre fiction is placed in the background or displaced. In her review of *A Short History of Indians in Canada* (2005), Suzanne Methot claims that King has had “highs and lows in his writing career” (“King Provides”). The newest short story collection is King “at his best,” and its quality matches the other works that have marked the “highs” of his career such as the “classic” *Green Grass, Running Water*, and *The Truth About Stories*, which Methot calls “a deliciously layered examination of the identities we create with the stories we tell” (“King Provides”). On her list of “lows,” is King’s first detective novel, *Dreadful Water Shows Up* (2003), which she calls “formulaic and predictable” (“King Provides”). Elsewhere, she writes with frustration that the novel is “completely devoid of the metaphorical substance of King’s other works, in which he uses humour to deconstruct Western culture, aboriginal culture, and Anglo-aboriginal relations” (“Dreadful Water”). Many reviewers celebrated the stylistic traits associated with King’s literary fiction, but the novel has received very little critical attention in comparison with King’s literary and historical works.⁷ Methot represents a more extreme region of a community that has, by and

large, deemed *DreadfulWater* unfit as the subject of scholarly and popular discourse. Methot's protestation that King's genre fiction is, in effect, *too generic*, ignores the labour of King's engagement with convention and formula as defining features of Native representation, not to mention the features of genre writing. In King's literary fiction, the Hollywood Western is an enduring trope that indexes a range of formulaic representations that inform non-Native attitudes towards Native communities. As in his non-detective novel, *Green Grass, Running Water*, the conventions of Western cinema are a focal point from which King explores the conditions of Native celebrity. King's light-hearted inhabitation of *formula* through the photographer Thumps DreadfulWater—a character who “frames” as he is generically framed and investigates a framing—has been overlooked as an important contribution to King's oeuvre. Such neglect in turn preserves his image as a literary author and helps maintain a certain prestige of iconic Canadian literary output.⁸

For Methot, the novel presents a “tricky matter of identity: Not cultural identity,” she insists, “but authorial identity. Hartley GoodWeather is the name that appears on the cover, but the goofy film-noir author photo . . . on the back of my advance reading copy clearly shows Thomas King, author of the novel *Green Grass, Running Water*” (“DreadfulWater”). The novel's pseudonymous cover did not seem to fool any reviewers; more likely, the burlesqued conventions of detective fiction confounded expectations of the person that Methot names “the author of *Green Grass, Running Water*.” But Methot is not alone, it seems, in desiring to bracket this novel to the side of the assemblage of works that has been readily and repeatedly appropriated by Canadian readers. By using a pseudonym for his detective novels, King explains that he “wanted to separate [his] serious work from his detective fiction” (Interview with Jordan Wilson). Considering King's use of scatological humour in *Green Grass*, his collection of children's stories, and his hilariously irreverent *Dead Dog Café* radio show, “serious” is an odd way to describe a collection of texts that more accurately balks at the institutional division between serious and non-serious literature.⁹ The tricky matter of authorial identity is not primarily the pseudonym, but the “authentic” author whose rogue detective novels contest the appropriations of his more transparently named works. The less critically well-received *DreadfulWater* resists the high culture identity of King's literary works that are readily associated with the “tricky(ster?) identity” of King himself.¹⁰ Negotiating the platforms of his authorial identity, King intricately plays so-called highbrow, middlebrow, and lowbrow genres off each other.

The paradox of King's cultural ambassadorship for Canada is nowhere more clear than in Season Four of CBC's Canada Reads when his second, Governor General's Award-nominated novel, *Green Grass, Running Water*, was represented by then-mayor of Winnipeg Glen Murray in the *Survivor*-style battle of the books.¹¹ The novel was in the running to be the one book that all of Canada should read, a title that would likely have launched a new print run of the novel by its Canadian publisher and facilitated tremendous exposure within Canada. *Green Grass* lost to Guy Vanderhaeghe's *The Last Crossing* (2003), but it was not the final score that raised the issue of the novel's place in Canadian national pedagogy. Defending the novel, Murray claims, "I like novels that move me outside my comfort zone . . . I want to get annoyed and angry when I read" (qtd. in Fuller 13). Danielle Fuller interprets this to mean that Murray desires a "reading practice oriented toward political transformation" that challenges the reader's assumptions and values (12). Murray was able to engage with and advocate for theories of national transcendence through the paradigm of Canada Reads, an occasion that posits from its outset an already defined national space variously characterized by cultural production. As an author who is invested in storytelling as a multiple and varied set of power-laden cultural events, I wonder what King thought of his novel competing to be the *one* story that *all* the nation should read. *Green Grass* works to "decentre the origins of master-narrative texts" (Davidson, Walton, and Andrews 67), and yet it was included in an event that aims to promote a single shared narrative. Conversely, I can only imagine that King would be pleased at the idea of a *story* being used as a forum and a catalyst for the type of communal discussion that a "mass reading event," to use the term coined by Fuller and DeNel Rehberg Sedo (8-9), has the potential to promote.

The national pedagogical project into which King's work has frequently been appropriated follows what Smaro Kamboureli, taking her lead from Emily Apter, has described as the "imperium of affect," by which "national pedagogy is an imperial project with at once a decidedly imperialist lineage and a globalizing intent" (45). The "easy feelings" (45) of unity and collective association facilitated by Canada Reads are part of an imperial project that, Kamboureli continues, "gathers into its domain everything, including those discourses it seeks to cancel out" (45). If *Green Grass* makes Murray feel "annoyed and angry," these "uneasy" feelings locate Murray as a potentially resistant voice on Canada Reads. His comments defy what the singer Measha Brueggergosman said when *Green Grass* lost to *The Last Crossing*: "how

very Canadian—we don't want anything that challenges us" (qtd. in Fuller and Sedo 24). Alternatively, Murray's affective response is secured within a framework of pleasure that he feels when he entertains a resistant discourse on a national platform that ultimately leaves the centrality of his identity and his privileges unharmed.

Although the novel has received considerable attention since its debut, it has never been discussed as a constitutive benchmark of the author's celebrity career. As well as a complex and polemical meditation on colonial borders, *Green Grass* thematizes the type of celebrity that is frequently conferred on Native writers and actors. We should not overlook the fact that the novel almost singularly responsible for activating King's public career has much to say about Native peoples and public visibility. As a Native writer, King's celebrity status is part of a legacy of a desire for authenticity reflexively staged in *Green Grass*. Francis notes that non-Native Canadians have always searched for representative Indians to give voice to the "special insight into the Indian way of life" (109). Francis also notes that many of these voices are inauthentic (109). There is a tension in Francis' essay between the fetishistic search for the "authentic" Indian that so fascinates the white world, and the much-repeated fact that many Indian celebrities have been inauthentic. In both instances, there is a continued interest in the authenticity of the Indian Native informant that King invokes playfully in both his public life and his fiction.

King takes on this tension in *Green Grass* when Eli, a Blackfoot character, remembers the Sun Dance festival he attended when he was fourteen. During one of the men's dances, a family of tourists drives onto the reserve. The father steps up onto the roof of his car and begins to take pictures of the ceremony. Seeing the Blackfoot men approaching the car, the father jumps back into the car, rolls up his windows, and locks the doors. Eli's uncle Orville demands the roll of film, explaining that one is not permitted to take photos of the Sun Dance. When we cut back to Eli's present situation, he is being told by a dam developer that he and his family are not "real Indians anyway" (*Green* 119). The developer continues, "you drive cars, watch television, go to hockey games. Look at you. You're a university professor" (119). The message here seems clear: the notion that what one perceives as authentic Native life is available for entertainment is exploitative, and yet at the same time, Native people are constantly being asked to produce that authenticity as a legitimating product.

"Green grass, running water" is a phrase found in early treaties, the title of the novel, and a line an "Indian" character speaks in a Western film that one

of King's characters watches in the novel (173). It unifies, therefore, a history of Anglo-Aboriginal relations that links Westerns with land claims.¹² In the novel, Western films are among the first things that the four elderly Native characters who escape the psychiatric hospital to fix the world decide to repair. At the mid-point of the text, all the major characters are watching a fictional Western, *The Mysterious Warrior*, and one of them is reading the novel (172-185). The Western is constituted by an assemblage of generic conventions that elsewhere King apes as a detective novelist. The conventional structure of the Western unites the novel's main characters as participants in the sphere of cultural production. When Alberta, Bill Bursum, Christian and Latisha, Lionel, Charlie, Babo, and Dr. Hovaugh are all watching the film in different places and times, they each observe a convention: Alberta watches "soldiers . . . trapped on one side of river . . . and the Indians . . . on their ponies on the other side (178); Christian and Latisha watch "as the cavalry charged into the river bottom" (179); Lionel watches as "an Indian danced his horse in the shallows of a river" (180); and Charlie spots his father playing "Iron Eyes" in a series of climactic motions summarized as "Etc., etc., etc." (182). Portland, playing Iron Eyes, is included as an actor rather than a spectator, reinforcing the performed nature of these ubiquitous images. The chain of conventions in the film shifts imperceptibly to the equally monotonous motion of Eli flipping the pages of his Western novel. All the scenes are interchangeable, as if the fictional *Mysterious Warrior* is simply an assemblage of conventions taken from the graves of Western cinema.

The Westerns, like the Native characters animating them, could have been manufactured on a Ford-era assembly line. Hollywood indexes the machine that in King's novel produces the Western storylines. Charlie Looking Bear's father, Portland, is nostalgic for the days he was a Hollywood actor playing Indian roles. To score major roles, Portland changes his name to "Iron Eyes Screeching Eagle"¹³ because it was "more dramatic" (127) and agrees to wear a fake nose that makes him "look more Indian" (130). Once he adequately resembles the archetypal Indian that Hollywood seeks to reproduce, he begins to perform identical simulacra of that figure on screen: "But before the year was out, Portland was playing chiefs. He played Quick Fox in *Duel at Sioux Crossing*, Chief Jumping Otter in *They Rode for Glory*, and Chief Lazy Dog in *Cheyenne Sunrise*. He was a Sioux eighteen times, a Cheyenne ten times, a Kiowa six times, an Apache five times, and a Navaho once" (127).¹⁴ The less distinctive Portland looks, the more distinctive roles he can play, and the more he resembles the cloned films he animates.

Portland's "Indian celebrity" in the Hollywood Western is a curious paradox that at once elevates his unique status on film ("Portland was playing chiefs") by erasing all signifiers of uniqueness (the name and the nose). The film producers capitalize on his indigeneity by exterminating the markers of his ethnicity and replacing them with commercial signifiers of authentic Indianness. The elevation to celebrity status for King's Native characters requires the submission to commodity status. As Charlie's mother explains, "It was your father's nose that brought us home [from Hollywood]" (128). Although I do not want to confuse character for author, Portland's objection to his screen representation gestures towards some of King's own struggles concerning his physical presentation. King actively resists interpellation for himself by this same consumerist model of celebrity. He tells Jace Weaver, "I don't want people to get the mistaken idea that I am an authentic Indian or that they're getting the kind of Indian that they'd like to have." He claims that he has been told, "you gotta get rid of that moustache [because] you're in the Indian business" (qtd. in Weaver 56). Like Portland's nose, King's moustache is an interruptive signifier of ethnic particularity that shapes what and who will be intelligible to a national audience as "authentically" Aboriginal.

There is another moment in *Green Grass* that has been overlooked as a site of celebrity critique mixed with biographical play. After we are introduced to Latisha, a single mother, we are introduced to her three children. They are Christian, Benjamin, and Elizabeth. Readers familiar with King's own biography will know that these are the names of his three children. King playfully gestures to his own family in the narrative in a strangely self-effacing way. We learn that Latisha's abusive husband abandoned the family, leaving her to care for their children alone. King has said elsewhere that he has difficulty writing active fathers into his stories because his own father was absent (Andrews 166), so the scene appears primed for readers to assume that they have found a biographical hook. The author seems to have gone out of his way to construct a familial fantasy in the novel that obfuscates his own appearance. Fans and celebrity interviewers are frequently invested in the degree to which they can locate an intelligible phantasm of the author in his or her writing. King strikes a critical pose in *Green Grass*, commenting not only on the national agendas through which Indigenous people experience fame, but also on the expectations of authenticity and intimacy that attend Indigenous people in public space.

Without turning the novel into a biography, I want to suggest that the character of the children's father is nonetheless a rich occasion for scholars

interested in King's celebrity to ask how the novel is thinking about Native celebrity. The children's father is by no means absent from the novel. George Morningstar, named for General George Armstrong Custer, is Latisha's abusive ex-husband who originates from Ohio and Michigan.¹⁵ That his pet name for Latisha is "Country" further suggests that his character serves as a conceptual link between the history of violence against Native peoples and domestic violence against Native women. Morningstar fills the domestic role in the novel that readers might expect to be a placeholder for the author, which makes Morningstar's disturbing final appearance in the novel a surprising and provocative occasion to query King's own thoughts about celebrity and his impact as an artist on Native communities. The final scene is a reprise of Eli's memory of the Sun Dance Festival from which his uncle chased a man trying to take pictures. In this redemptive moment for Eli, it is he who must confront the photographer, Morningstar, who is secretly trying to photograph the Festival. King is also a photographer, and if at first it seems that Morningstar plays out a simple Oedipal drama for the author, the character's role and its relation to the author become more complex when Morningstar is driven in disgrace from the Festival for representing Native life photographically. It is worth dwelling on the fact that the father of Christian, Benjamin, and Elizabeth in *Green Grass* is driven out of the community near the end of the novel for representing the Sun Dance while King himself describes parts of this festival in a work of fiction (that will go on to launch the author's career). My suggestion is not that Morningstar is a self-hating mirror for King—far from it—but that Morningstar marks a convincing place in the text where King is thinking about and experimenting with the stakes of being a Native writer read by non-Native and Indigenous readers alike. King could not have known that his novel would attract the volume of readers that it did, but he may well have been ruminating on the responsibilities and expectations of Indigenous authors. Morningstar's hideous personality and his disgraceful namesake animate the risks associated with being hailed as a cultural ambassador. As one of the first novels that thrust King into the national spotlight, *Green Grass* comments sensitively on the anxieties that attend its own circulation.

When asked if *Green Grass* is a Canadian novel, King claims, "Well, since I am a Canadian citizen and it was written in Canada, and it was written about places in Canada and characters who are, by and large, Native and Canadian—for all those reasons it's a Canadian novel" (King in Andrews 161). But King is not sure whether the novel is Canadian in

an “aesthetic sense” (161), or what a Canadian aesthetic might be. King’s oddly quantitative and ambivalent answer may not be a questioning of the novel’s national aesthetic so much as an affirmation of its Canadian national affinity; having published *Green Grass* in the same year that Robert Lecker published “A Country Without A Canon?: Canadian Literature and the Esthetics of Idealism” (1993), King appears to share in what Lecker identifies as a condition that ranges from indifference to objection to the notion of a Canadian literary canon. Indeed, King’s concerns have not seemed to hinder the novel’s circulation within Canada, nor do they reflect a wider consensus about its Canadian identity. Not only was it nominated for the Governor General’s Award in 1993, but it was featured on Canada Reads and it is frequently taught in literature courses in Canadian universities (161), arguably making it part of the de facto Canadian literary canon.

As King shows, the labour of defining and refining the Canadian literary canon, especially as it relates to Aboriginal literature, is constitutive—rather than limiting—of the project of cultural ambassadorship. King’s own visibility presents an opportunity to arbitrate the categories available to us for appropriating and deploying his literary productions. Davidson, Walton, and Andrews claim that while King can be considered a Native writer and a Canadian writer, “he cannot be a Canadian Native writer because the Cherokees are not “native” to Canada” (13). Such policing of identity categories reveals their inadequacy as descriptors of the national imaginary reflected in the Canadian literary canon as well as Canadians’ continued interest in them as legitimating products of national consecration. The fact that King appears to embody different and perhaps conflicting identities does not preclude him from cultural ambassadorship because the very process of national consecration of cultural artifacts is itself often an ambiguous, nervous activity. The national appropriation of cultural artifacts not only invests in works that already fall within a nationalizing agenda, but also frequently operates with and across resistant works. King is exemplary not of a particular Canadian condition but of a critical voice that comes to bear on the condition of national literary celebrity.

NOTES

- 1 King’s bid for office initiated another mode of celebrity that is deserving of additional attention, but this essay does not seek to intervene in the discussion of King’s political celebrity. For more on King’s political persona, see George (2008); “Guelph NDP: Tom

- King Introduces Himself" (2008); and thoughts on political speech and novelistic speech in Rintoul (2012).
- 2 King was once called a "local celebrity" (George) in reference to his bid for office in Guelph, Ontario. In contrast, Lorraine York (2007) refers to Margaret Atwood, Michael Ondaatje, and Carol Shields as twenty-first century Canadian literary celebrities on the basis that they are described as such in the media.
 - 3 See *The Inconvenient Indian*, 53-75, where King distinguishes between living Native people—"Live Indians"—and the "Dead Indians" imagined by North Americans in self-serving ways.
 - 4 See King in George (2008) where he discusses his adopted daughter with fetal alcohol syndrome. Elsewhere, King tells Andrews (1999) that, as an effect of his own father abandoning him as a child, he writes absent fathers in his fiction (166).
 - 5 While Aboriginal nations are not "third-world" nations, I believe that Brennan's observation that an exploration of literary celebrity cannot proceed without a discussion of the Native informant is quite relevant to the history of Native celebrity. First Nations have been described as "fourth-world" nations, a term coined by George Manuel in his 1974 book *The Fourth World: An Indian Reality*.
 - 6 See King's interview with Jordan Wilson (2009) for a discussion of King's multi-genre career.
 - 7 To date, there are only three scholarly articles on King's detective fiction (Breitbach 2012; Daxell 2005; and Andrews and Walton 2006).
 - 8 Julie Breitbach (2012) has also shown that King's detective fiction contributes to a wide-ranging genre known as "Native Detective Fiction" (89-94).
 - 9 When asked why he prefers not to be labeled a comic writer, King says, "[p]artly it's because comic writers don't win literary awards" (qtd. in Andrews 165). National celebrity is clearly one motivating factor in his decisions regarding the promotion of his writing.
 - 10 The second printing of *DreadfulWater* is attributed to "Thomas King writing as Hartley GoodWeather," as is the second novel in the *DreadfulWater* series, *The Red Power Murders*. This deferred attribution more radically brackets them from King's featured works. For if *DreadfulWater* and *Red* are written as GoodWeather, then King's other works are presumably written as King. The publishers of *DreadfulWater* and *Red* ensure readers that the detective novels are penned by a persona who declines to compete with appropriations of King's "classic" texts while still acknowledging the marketing power of the Thomas King brand name.
 - 11 Murray represented *Green Grass* on CBC's Canada Reads the same year that King was awarded the Order of Canada.
 - 12 Davidson, Walton, and Andrews claim that this phrase comes from early Anglo-Aboriginal treaties that state the terms of the treaty shall be observed "as long as the grass is green and the water runs" (3). King admits in *Inconvenient Indian* that he has yet to find a treaty containing these words, suggesting that they are as much a part of the folklore in which Western cinema has partaken as they are representative of fraught Native-colonial relations. A promise as phantasmagoric as the colonial state's commitment to a land claim becomes a commodified, convenient sound bite in a Western film.
 - 13 Portland's screen name is phonetic with "ironize," perhaps to underscore the irony of the inauthentic process by which he assumes the guise of authenticity.
 - 14 Portland's screen life exploits the image of the "pan-tribal" Indian with which King himself has been associated (see pp 58). The pan-tribal identification is a complex

association that both erodes difference and allows the individual to resist striking the pose of a Native informant for a particular community.

- 15 George Armstrong Custer (1839-1876) was a Commander in the American Civil War and later a General in the Indian Wars. He and his subordinates were all killed during the Battle of Little Bighorn. He was born in Ohio and was raised in Michigan. Author Evan S. Connell named him “Son of the Morning Star” in his 1984 book of that name. In *Green Grass*, Morningstar jokes with the Lone Ranger that he is “General Custer” (319).

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