

There is no Bentham Street in Calgary

Panoptic Discourses and Thomas King's *Medicine River*

Thomas King's first novel, *Medicine River* (1989), has not received much critical attention. Only a handful of articles have been written on it and the sole book-length study of King's work, the recently published *Border Crossings: Thomas King's Cultural Inversions* by Arnold E. Davidson, Priscilla L. Walton, and Jennifer Andrews, devotes less than ten pages to it. This critical neglect can, perhaps, be explained by the general view of *Medicine River* as the most accessible of King's novels and, in particular, as lacking the range and density of cultural and historical reference in his second novel, *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993). As Darrell Jesse Peters puts it, the "strength of [*Medicine River*] lies in its deconstruction of popular stereotypes concerning Native people" (67). With one exception, an article by Stuart Christie that focuses on the historical correspondences in the novel, the standard critical assessment is that *Medicine River* is restricted in its intertextual manoeuvres to subverting conventional stereotypes of First Nations peoples. It is a view explicitly taken up by Percy Walton (78–9) and implicit in *Border Crossings*, where discussion is largely confined to King's comic inversion of cultural stereotypes.¹ In his generic categorization of *Medicine River* as comic realism, Herb Wylie takes this critical evaluation one step further. Seeing *Medicine River* as retaining "the sense of a consistent, contained, empirical reality" that is disrupted by King's later fiction, Wylie situates it outside the framework of intertextual allusion altogether (112). Disregarding its gender specification, the reprimand delivered by Harlen Bigbear, the trickster figure in *Medicine River*, to the members of the basketball team he coaches, after the team loses a tournament, is equally well-deserved by the critics of the novel: "You boys don't try hard enough" (15).

Medicine River is less conspicuous and more subtle in its intertextual referencing than *Green Grass, Running Water*. It also shows a decided preference for Canadian over American content in its cultural and historical references, an intertextual bias, as it were, which may help to explain the critical neglect of the novel: American critics don't get the references. What excuse can be offered for Canadian critics? The question may be more effectively addressed later in the essay, after some demonstration of the elaborate intertextuality of *Medicine River*, and an assessment of the strategic value of its intertextual operations. What better place to start than with an intertextual reference in which King provides a metafictional hint on how to read *Medicine River*.

"James and me grew up in an apartment on Bentham Street in Calgary" (44). There is not now, nor was there ever as far as I can discover, a Bentham Street in Calgary.² Neither a realistic nor an incidental detail, "Bentham" can most fruitfully be read as a reference to the eighteenth-century Utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham and his panopticon, Bentham's architectural design for a circular prison that makes inmates constantly visible to a central tower or point of observation, "a never-closing inquisitorial eye," as Bentham called it (cited in Semple 144).³ A particularly effective technology of surveillance, the panopticon derives its power from the prisoners' assumption that they are always under observation and must therefore act accordingly. The panopticon is also, of course, the figure Michel Foucault uses for the regulatory operations of dominant discourses. In Foucault's definition, dominant discourses are systems of knowledge constituted by binary rules of inclusion or exclusion. Like Bentham's panopticon, they are instruments of knowledge and of power. Because they define social reality, not only for the dominant group whose culture generates them, but also for dominated groups, they can be seen as imposing a constant surveillance. They also, like Bentham's panopticon, function to instill discipline, persuading subjects to become agents of their own subjection by internalizing the subjectivity constructed for them by certain systems of knowledge. Caught in the gaze of dominant discourse power/knowledge, subjects become, like Bentham's prisoners, self-disciplining.⁴ As is indicated by the scene which immediately follows the initial Bentham Street reference, King both adopts and revises Foucault's formulation, using "Bentham" not only as a metaphor for the operations of the dominant discourse that is colonialism, but also for the tactics and strategies of discourses that struggle against colonial relations of power/knowledge:

There were other Indian families in the building, mostly mothers and children. We all spent a lot of time playing in the basement, and Henry Goodrider, who was a few years older than me and who was always doing something funny, made up a big cardboard sign that said Bentham Reserve, Indians Only. Henry didn't mean that the white kids couldn't play in the basement. It was just a joke, but Lena Oswald told her mother, and Mrs. Oswald came downstairs carrying a blue can with little animals painted on the sides. She put the can on the bench and took the sign off the door.

She gathered us all together and asked us our names. Then she shook hands with us and said we should all be friends. "White people do not live on reserves," she said. "And no matter what your colour, all of us here are Canadians."

Then she opened the can and gave each of us two big chocolate chip cookies. (44)

The story of Mrs. Oswald and Henry Goodrider, recollected from the childhood memories of the novel's narrator, Will Horse Capture, provides a particularly good illustration of *Medicine River's* intertextual resourcefulness. An allegory of colonial power and anti-colonial resistance, it offers a symbolic representation of the history of colonial relations between the dominant anglo-European Canadian culture and First Nations peoples, from the time of the signing of the first Treaties in the late seventeenth century, up to the time of the novel's setting in the 1980s. It also demonstrates the point that King makes in his 2003 Massey Lectures, that, historically, legislation related to First Nations people has operated "to relieve us of our land" and "to legalize us out of existence" (*Truth* 130). With her character visibly marked by the language and rituals of Canadian colonialism in its historical encounters with First Nations peoples, Mrs. Oswald appears in the scene in a number of different guises. In one, she is a Treaty Commissioner, doling out symbolic handshakes and promises of peace and friendship in exchange for Indian land title. In another, she is the infamous 1969 Trudeau government White Paper, a policy document designed to nullify the Treaties and eliminate Reserve lands (Indian Chiefs of Alberta 5), a "termination plan," as King has called it (*Truth* 137). The White Paper even contained a "cookie" clause: "If Indian people are to become full members of Canadian society they must be warmly welcomed by that society" (Government of Canada 5).

Mrs. Oswald's character also alludes to the Indian Act, which, since its first passage in 1876, has operated to define, control, and assimilate First Nations peoples. Indeed, it is because of the defining power of the Indian Act that Will, his brother James, and their mother Rose Horse Capture are currently living in the Bentham Street apartment in Calgary. For, by marrying a white man, Rose has lost her legal status as Indian and hence her right to live on the Stand Off Reserve, which is her home. The Indian Act thus not

only advanced assimilation, but also discriminated against women, as Indian men retained their status when they married non-Indians.⁵

Mrs. Oswald's concluding statement, "And no matter what your colour, all of us here are Canadians," reveals at least one more intertext for her character: Canadian multiculturalism, first introduced as state policy in 1971 and then enshrined in law in the Multiculturalism Act of 1988. Along with the values of diversity, tolerance, equality, and harmony with which it is associated, multiculturalism has become the centrepiece of Canadian identity, setting forth a narrative of national progress, according to which the nation has left behind the racial and cultural hierarchies and exclusions of the past. But, as Homi Bhabha observes, multiculturalism has ways of preserving the dominant group's cultural hegemony, one of which is to construct a norm/other binary, the norm being "given by the host society or dominant group" ("Third Space" 208). In her use of the second (as opposed to the first) person plural pronoun in the phrase "your colour," Mrs. Oswald offers a perfect illustration of this strategy, defining Henry and his friends as racially Other, in relation to which "white" remains an unmarked category of privilege and power. Then, in a reflection of the way in which the dominant culture uses multiculturalism to deflect the demands of First Nations peoples for self-government and self-identification and to erase First Nations nationalities from the national landscape, Mrs. Oswald assimilates the children into the eurocentric framework of Canadian identity. The irony of Mrs. Oswald's position is that the ideal multicultural Canadian nation she imagines is one that does not even serve her own interests. For it offers her no protection against an abusive husband whose brutality sends her regularly to hospital for treatment for wounds and fractures. It is, in other words, a patriarchal as well as a colonial order, the same social order that denied Rose Horse Capture her rights as a status Indian.

While Mrs. Oswald personifies the "dominating, overseeing gaze" (Foucault 152) of colonial power, Henry Goodrider and his sign, "Bentham Reserve, Indians Only," symbolize First Nations resistance to colonial power. In its reversal of the terms of the Canadian government's "Whites Only" apartheid policy, on the basis of which Indian Reserves were established in the first place, Henry's sign exposes and ridicules the discriminatory knowledges of colonial authority. Subverting the dominant culture's binary system of knowledge, the sign also establishes another, specifically First Nations, site of power/knowledge. In King's narrative, "Bentham Reserve" means "the strategic reversal of the process of domination. . . .

that turn[s] the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power” (Bhabha, *Location* 112).

The Mrs. Oswald-Henry Goodrider scene in *Medicine River* is paradigmatic of the larger narrative: intertextuality is its major mode of resistance against colonial power. The same reliance on historical allusion to expose the colonial nature of Canadian society is found, for example, in the textual details the narrative provides concerning Rose Horse Capture’s employment during the time she lives with her sons in the Bentham Street apartment in Calgary. Rose works, first for the Hudson’s Bay Company, and then for Petro-Canada, in both cases as a cleaner, a category of work which, in its exploitiveness, epitomizes the experience of First Nations people in Canada since the founding of the Hudson’s Bay Company in the 1600s. In dominant Canadian culture, “the Bay,” as it is commonly known, is a conventional signifier of Canadian national identity, a designation which, in its suppression of the company’s historical role as a tool of British colonialism and an exploiter of First Nations labour and resources, offers considerable insight into the way in which historical amnesia is culturally produced in a society. Established by the Canadian government in 1975, Petro-Canada, with its mandate to nationalize the Canadian oil industry, quickly became a symbol of Canadian sovereignty. But as its practice of ignoring Aboriginal land rights indicates, Petro-Canada, as well as the “postcolonial” nation state it represents, is as colonial in its relations with First Nations peoples as was colonial society.⁶

While King subjects the Canadian historical record to scrutiny throughout his narrative, *Medicine River*’s main intertext is the English European-Canadian literary tradition. Concentrating on the period of high Canadian nationalism which started in the mid-1960s and lasted through to the mid-1980s, King reveals the colonial affiliations of contemporary Canadian literary culture. Included in his intertextual examination are the two most important theoretical works in recent Canadian literary history, Northrop Frye’s “Conclusion” to a *Literary History of Canada* (1965) and Margaret Atwood’s *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972), works which have had an enormous influence on the formation of the English Canadian literary canon over the past three decades. Frye’s most famous comment from the “Conclusion,” that the Canadian literary imagination is “less perplexed by the question ‘Who am I?’ than by some such riddle as ‘Where is here?’” (220), is evoked several times in King’s narrative, one of the references occurring in Mrs. Oswald’s expression of nationalist sentiment: “All of us here are Canadians.”⁷ As Renée Hulan notes, ever since Frye

first asked his question, it “has teased Canadian literary criticism with the promise of an answer, a national punchline that we could all get” (61). As we shall see, King provides that punchline. But it would seem that his solution to Frye’s riddle—a solution which exposes and displaces Frye’s colonial conceptualization of Canadian identity—falls so far outside the scope of the rules and prevailing ideas of the dominant discourse that the Canadian literary and cultural establishment doesn’t get it. King also uncovers the ideological alliance with colonial practices of Atwood’s characterization of Canadian identity as defined by victimhood and survival, survival in the face of a hostile nature and of British and U.S. imperialism. At the beginning of *Medicine River*, Harlen is described by Will as having “a strong sense of survival” (2), a direct reference to Atwood’s casting of European Canadians as victims of colonial exploitation and not as agents of colonialism in their relations with First Nations peoples.

Medicine River’s main intertextual focus, however, is the English Canadian literary canon which developed out of Frye and Atwood’s nationalist aesthetic and, in particular, two of the most canonical works of the period: Atwood’s *Surfacing* (1972) and Margaret Laurence’s *The Diviners* (1974). *Medicine River* plays on both the form and content of these narratives. As Frank Davey observes in his study of post-centennial anglophone-Canadian fiction, many of the novels of the period, including *Surfacing* and *The Diviners*, are “doubly-plotted first person narrative[s]” in which the narrator “alternate[s] regularly between presenting the present and the retrospective action” (236). *Medicine River* conforms absolutely to this narrative pattern, intercutting Will’s memories of the past with contemporary events in *Medicine River*. As Davey also observes, the double narratives of authors such as Atwood and Laurence all use a “crisis in the narrator’s present” to motivate the investigation of the past (236). *Medicine River* adopts this same plot mechanism, with Will being prompted by the death of his mother to review his life: the years of his childhood spent in the Bentham Street apartment after his father’s desertion of the family; and his more recent experience of working as a photographer in Toronto.

Medicine River also closely resembles Atwood’s and Laurence’s novels in its symbolic structure. What I will call “orphanhood,” using the word metonymically to refer to the loss, not only during childhood but also later in life, of one parent or both through death or abandonment, is a recurring theme in all three novels. Morag in *The Diviners* is an orphan proper, as both of her parents have died by the time she is five years old. She also loses

her adoptive parents in the course of the narrative. Atwood's nameless narrator too loses both parents, although she has reached young adulthood by the time of their death. Will becomes fatherless at a very early age when his father abandons the family; and by the time of the present setting of the narrative, he has, like Atwood's and Laurence's narrators, lost both his parents. Like the other narrators too, Will is on a voyage of discovery, his journey through physical space from Toronto to Medicine River serving as a metaphor for a journey into personal history. The object of Will's quest is also, like that of Atwood's and Laurence's narrators, to find a missing father. Metaphorically, Will is in search of a home and an identity—as are the other narrators. Finally, like the other two novels, *Medicine River* is a national allegory, that is, to modify slightly Fredric Jameson's formulation, a novel in which "the story of the private individual destiny is . . . an allegory of the embattled situation of the public . . . culture and society" ("Third-world" 69).⁸

As Bhabha says, "mimicry is at once resemblance and menace" (*Location* 86). Having invoked the narrative conventions of Atwood's and Laurence's novels, *Medicine River* systematically alters them, revealing in the process some of the tactics and strategies of dominant culture power. Orphanhood is such a common figure in English Canadian literature—Canada's most famous literary orphan, Anne of Green Gables, Naomi of Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*, Hana of Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*, the children of the MacDonald family in Alistair MacLeod's *No Great Mischiefs*, Pi Patel in Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*, as well as Atwood's narrator and Laurence's Morag—it might be considered one of its defining features. In the dominant Canadian literary tradition, orphanhood signifies the geographical and historical displacement of immigrants, who, by leaving their ancestral homes, cut themselves off from their historical roots and collective past. King revises this trope, using it to represent the dispossession and displacement of First Nations people by European colonial occupation and immigration. By thus refiguring the trope, King effects a displacement of the colonial perspectives which inform it: the myth of the empty continent, the notion of European cultural superiority, the claim of a European right to settlement.

Atwood's narrative evinces no discomfort with the contradictions entailed in its use of the orphan trope. Laurence, on the other hand, perhaps in part because *The Diviners* comes after *Surfacing*, and certainly as a result of the understanding of colonialism she acquired during the time she spent in Somalia and Ghana in the years leading up to their independence from Britain, aims for inclusiveness in her representation of Canadian history and

society. The inclusive character of her national vision is, perhaps, most evident in her designation of Morag's daughter Pique, who is Métis on her father's side, as the novel's embodiment of Canadian identity. More significant for my present purposes, however, is Laurence's use of motherlessness in the case of Jules Tonnerre, Morag's lover and Pique's father, as one of a number of significations in the novel of Métis and, presumably by extension, First Nations displacement and cultural loss because of European colonization. But, while *The Diviners* has, not without reason, been considered remarkable for its incorporation of perspectives on Canadian history and society which are normally missing from dominant culture representations, it also repeatedly falls back on predictable, stereotypical identifications of First Nations people. For example, unlike Morag's parents, Jules' mother does not die, but rather (irresponsibly) abandons her children, while his father, whom in later life Jules comes to resemble closely, is violent, lecherous, and alcoholic. Furthermore, Jules himself essentially abandons his daughter, Pique, to be brought up single-handedly by Morag. Using a self-reflexive parodic discourse, King inverts these stereotyped representations in *Medicine River* by casting Will's (white) father in the role of both the irresponsible and the dissolute parent. He also undercuts the parallels between Métis and Scottish immigrant history that Laurence, in an attempt to justify European appropriation of First Nations land, emphasizes, using Will's father's desertion of his family to represent the long-standing and on-going treatment of First Nations by European immigrants and colonial and Canadian governments: abandonment, broken promises, impoverishment.

As both Margery Fee and Terry Goldie explain, one of the strategies white writers employ in an attempt to resolve the dilemma of immigrant displacement and to establish a Canadian identity is to connect their white protagonists "with an object, image, plant, animal, or person associated with Native people" (Fee 16). Goldie labels this process "indigenization," a word which "suggests the impossible necessity of becoming indigenous." For white writers especially, he says, "the only possible chance seems to be through the humans who are truly indigenous" (73). Atwood and Laurence both employ this strategy in their novels. Atwood has her narrator in *Surfacing* discover an Indian Rock painting, a discovery that enables her to achieve Canadian self-definition. In a similar move, Laurence uses Morag's relations with Jules as a means of empowering her protagonist to find independence and freedom. As Fee says of the ubiquity of this narrative movement: "It allows, through the white character's association with the Native, for a white 'liter-

ary land claim,' analogous to the historical territorial take-over, usually implicit or explicit in the text" (17).

At this point the intertextual plot thickens, as King, too, characterizes indigenization as an act of cultural imperialism justifying the perpetuation of colonial relations of domination and subjugation. Not incidentally, Fee's and Goldie's essays were published in *The Native in Literature* (1987), a collection of essays co-edited and introduced by Thomas King. As I will try to indicate, in its treatment of a number of issues, *Medicine River* can be read intertextually as a narrativization or novelization of *The Native in Literature*. King presents his critique of indigenization through the story of the relationship Will has in Toronto with Susan Adamson, who, as her surname might suggest, is the embodiment of dominant culture power. Adding yet another layer of intertextual meaning, this story is, in itself, a parodic rewriting of Laurence's story of the Morag-Jules relationship in *The Diviners*. Like Morag, Susan is trapped in a loveless marriage from which she needs to be liberated. What attracts her to Will is made evident by a remark she makes at one of their initial meetings: "You're Indian, aren't you?" (108). In the role he plays in the relationship, Will fits the description Goldie provides of Jules: "a symbol of sexual prowess, which a white female might use in her own liberation" (71). True to form, following sexual contact, Susan, like Morag, is able to leave her husband and find fulfilment as an independent woman in a new life she creates for herself, in her case in Pickering Ontario. The similarities end here. For according to the conventions of this (colonial) narrative, the Native character, having performed the role of catalyst in the white character's emancipation, must, as Jules does, die (Goldie 77). Will escapes this fate, narrowly it seems, as King wryly acknowledges the potency of the convention by (twice) identifying Susan with the nuclear power plant, Canada's oldest, largest, and most accident prone, situated in Pickering (224 and 234).

In his treatment of Will's quest for self-identification, King plays parodically on both Laurence's and Atwood's texts, making the trajectory of Will's journey of self-discovery very similar to that of Laurence's and Atwood's narrators. Initially all three narrators are alienated from their roots and their past, Morag and Atwood's narrator from Canadian culture and Will from Blackfoot culture. All three also experience mental colonization. As signified by her marriage to Brooke Skelton, an English man and a professor of English literature, Morag internalizes the colonial assumption of the superiority of English and inferiority of Canadian culture. Atwood's narra-

tor, on the other hand, adopts the values of American technological society, her relationship with a married man and the abortion she has as a young woman signifying her status as a victim of colonizing forces. Will also follows the path of assimilation, but in his case it is the one laid out for him by Mrs. Oswald in her “all of us here are Canadians” declaration, the relationship he has in Toronto with Susan representing his assimilation to the dominant, white Canadian culture. Finally, all three undergo a decolonizing process, with Morag and Atwood’s narrator embracing their Canadian identity and Will reclaiming his Blackfoot heritage.

All three novels present themselves as narratives of decolonization. However, when *Surfacing* and *The Diviners* are read dialogically through *Medicine River*, it becomes evident that their decolonizing manoeuvres are implicated in the colonial enterprise. For Will’s status as a colonized subject in King’s narrative not only throws into question Atwood’s and Laurence’s casting of their narrators as victims (as opposed to agents) of colonial exploitation. It also makes evident that, from a First Nations perspective, their eventual adoption of a Canadian identity is not a formulation of decolonization but rather is, like Mrs. Oswald’s nationalist stance, an assimilationist tactic. But King takes his deconstruction of Canadian identity in *Medicine River* one step further, indicating, as he does much more explicitly in his later writing, that Canada is itself a colonial invention.

“National allegory” is a term I applied earlier, not only to *Surfacing* and *The Diviners*, but also to *Medicine River*. And certainly Will’s story, like that of Atwood’s narrator and of Morag, runs in parallel to history and is offered as an emblem of national over-coming. For example, Will’s assimilation to white Canadian culture represents the historical process of colonization and the assimilationist policies and practices of successive national governments; and his reclamation of his Blackfoot identity, a cultural identity which has been thwarted by colonialism, captures in cameo form the process of decolonization and the reestablishment or maintenance of First Nations self-determination. But King undermines the logic of the narrative of nation model Atwood and Laurence employ, a model from the perspective of which First Nations autonomy or nationhood is not imaginable.⁹ For, if decolonization is to occur in *Medicine River*, Will’s metaphorical journey must ultimately take him in the opposite direction from that in which Atwood’s narrator and Morag travel: away from a Canadian identity. By exposing the contradiction that lies at the core of the Canadian decolonization project, the contiguous relationship between Canadian nation-

hood and colonial occupation of First Nations territory, King subverts, as well as menaces, the cultural authority, not only of narratives of nation such as *Surfacing* and *The Diviners*, but also of all Canadian nationalist discourse.

To underscore the point that the national community imagined in *Medicine River* is not defined by the Canadian nation state, a colonial construct, but rather by First Nations self-definition, King also plays parodically on the conventions of landscape representation in dominant Canadian culture. As W. H. New demonstrates so effectively in *Land Sliding: Imagining Space, Presence, and Power*, Canadian writers have recurrently used landscape to fashion their images of nationhood. Both *Surfacing* and *The Diviners* open with passages of what New calls “symbolic landscape description” (145). By contrast, *Medicine River* insists from the outset on the urban setting of its narrative: “Medicine River sat on the broad back of the prairies. It was an unpretentious community of buildings banked low against the weather that slid off the eastern face of the Rockies” (1). In focusing on the town, King upturns the conventional European Canadian identification of First Nations peoples and cultures with nature. He may also be pointing to the gap between the urban character of contemporary Canadian society and the natural landscape images which Canadian culture continues to employ to define Canadian identity. The major function of his backgrounding of the natural landscape, however, is to distance or disassociate his narrative from the nationalist aesthetic of texts such as *Surfacing* and *The Diviners* and to locate it in another field of discourse altogether, outside the confines of Canadian nationalism.

Using this same distancing strategy, King also draws attention to the fetishistic treatment of water within Canadian literary discourse, thus anticipating the question New was to ask a decade later: “why is the water so important to Canadian writers” (122)? Both Atwood and Laurence use water as a primary indicator of national identity; both locate their narrators beside bodies of water in the opening sentences of their novels. King calls his novel *Medicine River*, referring both literally and figuratively to the healing powers of First Nations communities. But he also very pointedly situates the river off in the distance, outside the purview of the town’s residents. “‘Say,’ said Harlen,” from the window table of a third-floor restaurant, “‘what a great view. What do you think? If we stood on the table, we could probably see the river’” (3). If, as New suggests, water, in texts such as *Surfacing* and *The Diviners*, signifies the possibility of starting afresh in “an unspoiled [that is unpeopled] land” (122), then King’s response is to laugh his head off.

Trickster Harlen also directly challenges the conventions of Canadian landscape representation, linking them with the long history of European appropriation of First Nations land. Knowing that Will needs to develop an identifying relationship between self and place in order to overcome the trauma of First Nations geographical and cultural displacement, Harlen counters the reasons Will offers for staying in Toronto by explaining to him the Blackfoot connections to the land in the environs of Medicine River:

I told Harlen I liked Toronto. There were good restaurants, places to go. Things to do. Medicine River was small.

"American Hotel is a great place for beer. Baggy's just opened a sit-down restaurant. You got the Rockies, too. You see over there," Harlen said, gesturing with his chin. "Ninastiko . . . Chief Mountain. That's how we know where we are. When we can see the mountain, we know we're home. Didn't your mother ever tell you that?" (93)

Place is "a palimpsest on which the traces of successive inscriptions form the complex experience of place, which is itself historical" (Ashcroft 182). King demonstrates this process of reinscription in *Medicine River*, writing over a place which has already been over-written by the text of colonialism. He also reverses one of the primary colonizing processes: the appropriation of place by naming. As well as demonstrating a total lack of colonial imagination, naming the mountains in southern Alberta "the Rockies," a name which is already a reinscription, was part of the colonial process of erasing the presence of First Nations people from the land they occupied and claiming mastery over it. Renaming the Rockies "Ninastiko," King (re)maps a Blackfoot geographical, linguistic, and social order on to the (de)colonized landscape. This, then, is King's solution to Frye's riddle. "Here" is not a European Canadian definition of place. Rather, "here" is Native land, First Nations territory.

In his Introduction to *The Native in Literature*, King notes that, in focusing on "how the presence of the Native has influenced white literature," traditional studies of literary representations of First Nations have "obscure[d] the influence that white culture has had on Native oral and written literature" (13). *Medicine River* demonstrates that influence. Engaging in what Laura Donaldson calls, in her analysis of *Green Grass, Running Water*, "a contestatory intertextuality" (40), its narrative interrogates, erodes, and supplants the panoptic discourses of colonial power/knowledge. In his Introduction, King also indicates the importance of literary texts as sites of cultural and political struggle. *Medicine River* makes this same point through its rewriting of the anglo-European canon of Canadian literature

from the viewpoint of First Nations cultural and political requirements. It therefore does not seem to be entirely coincidental that *Medicine River* has suffered a fate very similar to that of the Shawnee oral narrative, “Thrown Away,” discussed in an essay in *The Native in Literature*: a “Native socio-political allegory,” which, as King says in his Introduction, has been consistently misread as “realistic narrative” (12–13).

There is, King says, another neglected area in the scholarship on “the Native in literature”: “the influence that Native oral literature has had on contemporary Native writers” (Introduction 13). As George L. Cornell, the author of the essay on “Thrown Away,” shows, “Thrown Away” is not a realistic story about Shawnee child abandonment, but rather is a symbolic representation of the abandonment of the Shawnee by the British after the American Revolution; of the rise to prominence of the Shawnee leaders, Tecumseh and his brother Tenskwatawa; and of Shawnee resistance to United States western, colonial expansion. “Thrown Away” would seem to have left its imprint on *Medicine River*, which is also a story of the abandonment of two brothers by their white “father.” More significantly, Cornell’s analysis of the function of oral narratives as “historical records of indigenous peoples” (180) precisely describes one of the narrative techniques King adopts in *Medicine River*—the symbolic representation of historical events as, for example, in the Mrs. Oswald-Henry Goodrider scene. It would therefore seem that in *Medicine River* King “draws from oral tradition to incorporate aspects of Native story-telling” as he also does in *Green Grass, Running Water* (Chester 45). Like *Green Grass, Running Water*, *Medicine River* also illustrates the more general point King makes in *The Truth About Stories* concerning Native written and oral literatures: that “they occupy the same space, the same time. And, if you know where to stand, you can hear the two of them talking to each other” (101–02).

Its intertextual performance, *Medicine River*, rather than deviating from what becomes an established pattern in King’s fiction, actually provides the model for his later writing. Why have the critics missed the rich referentiality of *Medicine River*? Cornell offers three interrelated reasons for the misapprehension of First Nations oral texts: the failure to place texts in the cultural and historical context in which they were produced; the imposition of European literary definitions on them; and the devaluation of orality in colonial culture. A slightly modified version of these reasons might help to explain the critical misreading of *Medicine River*. Still, since the allusions, however subtly invoked, refer in many cases to Canadian cultural icons—

Northrop Frye, Margaret Laurence, the Rocky Mountains, the Hudson's Bay Company—it is difficult to imagine how Canadian critics could miss them. Perhaps it is *because* the targets of King's subversive tactics are especially revered elements of Canadian culture. *Medicine River* may, in other words, be just too threatening to cherished notions of Canadian identity for Canadian critics to handle. Or perhaps it is that, as Raymond Williams says, there are "areas of practice and meaning which, almost by definition from its own limited character, or in its profound deformation, the dominant culture is unable in any real terms to recognize" (cited in Bhabha, *Location* 148). Whatever the case, King turns to a much more blatant form of intertextuality in *Green Grass, Running Water*, making the intertextual character of his undertaking unmissable.

Nonetheless, and in spite, or perhaps because, of the relative inconspicuousness of its intertextual manoeuvres, *Medicine River* does provide quite explicit instructions on how to read its narrative, amplifying, as it were, through the story of Will's brother James, the metafictional clue provided earlier in the novel in the scene involving Mrs. Oswald and Henry Goodrider. Unlike Will, James stays in Medicine River with their mother up until the time of her death, after which he moves to San Francisco where he will have more of an opportunity to make his living as a visual artist. He also becomes a world traveller. Mexico, Australia, New Zealand, France, Japan, Hawaii, South America: James has been there. From each of the places he visits, he sends Will a postcard. "The return address always said, 'Bentham Reserve'" (145). Bentham Reserve is also the perspective from which *Medicine River* is written.¹⁰

NOTES

- 1 See the pages referred to in the index of *Border Crossings* under the entry "*Medicine River*."
- 2 My thanks to the staff at the Calgary Public Library for consulting various Calgary street directories. I would also like to thank Gord Ames, Nils Clausson, Lynn and Helen McCaslin, Ben Proctor, Fred Stratton, and Peggy Wigmore for their research assistance.
- 3 It is also worth noting that the logo Bentham designed for his prison was of "an ever-open eye encircled by the words, 'Mercy, Justice, Vigilance'" (Semple 143).
- 4 Foucault 109–33, Ashcroft *et al* 41–3 and 226–27, and Semple 9–10 and 144.
- 5 In 1985 the Indian Act was amended to remedy the discrimination against First Nations women. But, as King points out in *The Truth About Stories*, though under the new legislation, Bill C-31, individuals, male or female, cannot lose status by marrying out of status, "their children and their children's children are at risk." This is because Bill C-31 contains "what is called 'the two generations cut-off clause.' Marry out of status for two

generations, and the children from the last union are non-status.” As King observes, since “right now about 50 percent of status Indians are marrying non-status folk. . . . if this rate holds steady, in fifty to seventy-five years there will be no status Indians left in Canada” (141–44).

- 6 The reference to Petro-Canada also reinforces some of the points King makes in “Godzilla vs. Post-Colonial”: that the term “postcolonial” is misleading in its assumption of progress and development; and that postcolonialism is both a eurocentric and a nationalist paradigm (11–12). For an account of Petro-Canada’s participation in the destruction of the lands and the economy of the Lubicon First Nation, see “The Lubicon of Northern Alberta.”
- 7 Several other evocations of Frye’s comment occur in Harlen’s discourse on place, 15 and 93. The second of these passages is discussed later in the essay.
- 8 According to Jameson, national allegories are an exclusively “third world” narrative mode. This restriction is, in his view, because, unlike “first world” countries, “third world” states are defined by “the experience of colonialism and imperialism” (“Third-world” 67). It would seem that Jameson does not always follow his own maxim: “Always historicize!” (*Political Unconscious* 9). As Aijaz Ahmad points out, Jameson’s analysis “rests . . . upon a suppression of the multiplicity of significant difference among and within both the advanced capitalist countries and the imperialised formations” (3). One of those differences appertains to the failure of colonies to dismantle aspects of colonialism in their political institutions and cultural attitudes after independence, the subject Laurence takes up in *The Diviners*. There is also the question of U.S. economic and cultural imperialism, the issue that Atwood tackles in *Surfacing*. Jameson’s most egregious omission, however, is the on-going experience of colonialism and imperialism of North American First Nations. The extent to which the United States has transcended nationalism is another question.
- 9 The exclusiveness of Laurence’s vision in this respect is made particularly evident by the trajectory of Pique’s voyage of self-discovery. For it is as an aspect of her Canadian identity that Pique sets off to discover her Métis heritage.
- 10 In their claim that King occupies an “‘in-between’ position, as a part-White and part-Native writer” (10), Davidson *et al* misconstrue Bhabha’s notion of an in-between or liminal space. Like race, liminality is a cultural, rather than a biological phenomenon. It is the location of subversive counter-discursive strategies which, as Bhabha explains, deconstruct fixed or essentialist identities, preventing them from “settling into primordial polarities” (*Location* 4).

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