

# Happy Trails to You

## Contexted Discourse and Indian Removals in Thomas King's *Truth & Bright Water*

### Border Crossings

In a paper called "Coyote Pedagogy: Knowing Where the Borders Are in Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water*," Margery Fee and Jane Flick point out that, "There is no reader of this novel, except perhaps Thomas King, who is not outside some of its networks of cultural knowledge" (131). Fortunately, they point out, "every reader is also inside at least one network and can therefore work by analogy to cross borders into others" (131). King's third novel, *Truth & Bright Water*, challenges the reader's abilities at border crossing. Within a narrative set in the present and written in the present tense, King has embedded, and then exhumed, a wealth of stories and characters from Indian history. Events and names in the narrator's story reveal events in the tragic history of Indian removals. Pairs, partners, correspondences and reversals abound. The book reads history as story, and story as history. It shows the reader both sides of its mirrored images. It is set in the border communities of Bright Water, a Canadian Indian reserve, and Truth, an adjacent American railroad town. The border that separates them is cultural as well as political. One side is Indian, the other white, but the characters cross often, if not easily, from one side to the other.

The narrator is a fifteen-year-old boy whose parents have shops on either side of Division Street in Truth. The actual towns that correspond to Truth and Bright Water are Sweet Grass, Montana and Coutts, Alberta. The Indian-sounding name is American. The harsh one is Canadian. King intentionally reverses these values to expose "the false dichotomies people set up" (King, "Notes"; Hoy). The names Truth and Bright Water suggest the game (and television game show) "Truth or Consequences," which is also the name of a town in New Mexico. While the connection might appear

to be far-fetched, it is not. In 1950, the town of Hot Springs or “Canada Alamosa” (another oblique reference to Canada) changed its name to Truth or Consequences (Ortiz 405; Truth or Consequences). The springs themselves are known locally as Geronimo Springs, “named for Apache leader Geronimo, who used them as a gathering place for his warriors” (Truth or Consequences). Geronimo was captured by General Nelson Miles (referred in the novel by the real estate developer, Miles Deardorf), and removed from his homeland to Fort Marion, Florida (a link to the Fort Marion captives in *Green Grass, Running Water*).

The novel pairs the narrator with his cousin, Lum, to suggest “right and left handed twins from oral stories, creative figures, halves of a pair” (Hoy). The narrator is a thinker, a storyteller, and as the book ends, a minstrel. Lum is a runner, a wounded warrior, “the boy with the bad eye” (102) and in the end, a jumper (resonant with the American paratrooper’s cry, “Geronimo”). Geronimo was trained to be a great runner and fearless warrior. He was a “war shaman” (Opler 200; Barrett 32). He had a bad eye as the result of a bullet wound (Barrett 101). Apache tradition attributes eye defects to “coyote sickness” (Opler 226). In the novel, Lum is training to race in Bright Water’s Indian Days celebration, but he is troubled by the ghosts of lost Indian children. He shoots bullets into the ground by his cousin’s feet, like Apache boys who train by slinging rocks at each other (Barrett 23). In a remarkable display of daring, he even runs across a railroad bridge in front of a moving train (73). According to Opler, Geronimo had coyote power, ghost power and power over guns (Opler 311).<sup>1</sup> Behind Lum’s story is Geronimo’s tragic history.

The political divide between Truth and Bright Water is also a natural one, a river called “the Shield.” The book’s first sentence is, “The river begins in ice” (1). Crossing from mountains to the green grass of the prairie, it transforms into running water. The river’s name is significant. It resonates with another land of ice, the Canadian Shield, and with Plains Indian shields, which are immensely important and multivocal symbols. A warrior paints his shield with designs representing his visionary encounters with supernatural helpers. Shields are icons that actualize the power of stories. Shields bring stories to life. The symbols on shields are intertribal and, like Plains sign language, facilitate communication across the divides of particular languages and traditions. When you view a shield, you recall the stories it represents. When you dream the design of a shield, you enter its stories directly. Geronimo’s shield protected him in war and represented his power

over guns. "When you see a man with a shield, you know it was made for him by a ceremonial man in connection with a war ceremony. . . . The shield is called, 'that which I hold up'" (Opler 311). Like a shield, *Truth & Bright Water* is richly decorated with colour symbolism and with images of painting as an act of re-creation.

There is a bridge over the river that "looks whole and complete." It appears as "a thin line, delicate and precise, bending over the Shield and slipping back into the land like a knife" (1). On closer inspection, however, the bridge is a barrier, a "tangle of rebar and wire that hangs from the girders like a web" (2). The traditional way of crossing the Shield is on Charlie Ron's ferry, "an old iron bucket suspended on a cable" (42). Guarding the approach to the bridge are "the Horns." The author's prologue describes the physical setting:

Above the two towns, the Shield is fat and lazy, doubling back on itself in long silver loops as it wanders through the coulees. But as the river comes around the Horns, it drops into the deep chutes beneath the bridge. It gathers speed here, swings in below the old church, and runs dark and swift for half a mile until the land tilts and the water slowly drains away towards Prairie View and the morning sun. (1)

### **Multiply Contexted Discourse**

Following King's prologue, the rest of the book is told in the highly contexted discourse of its fifteen-year-old narrator who, quite naturally, does not refer to himself by name. Only well into the story and only once, in the context of a narrated dialogue with the narrator's auntie Cassie, do we hear that his name is Tecumseh:

"Tecumseh!, " auntie Cassie slips out of the chair. "Last time I saw you you were a baby"  
"No I wasn't." (52)

Like Lum, the narrator is both himself and a character from Indian history. Tecumseh was a Shawnee chief and warrior who attempted unsuccessfully to unite the tribes of the Mississippi valley into an Indian nation.<sup>2</sup> He was killed in 1813 at the battle of the Thames by the army of General (later President) William Henry Harrison. The defeat of Tecumseh and his brother Tenskwatawa, the Shawnee Prophet, paved the way for an American doctrine of removing Indians to "Indian Territory" west of the Mississippi. The application of this doctrine led to the Cherokee "trail of tears." Giving the narrator the name of Tecumseh alerts the reader to the reality that Indian history underlies the stories of individual Indians. The name also suggests appropriation of Indian history through its association with Civil

War general William Tecumseh Sherman, whose “march to the sea” devastated former Cherokee homelands in Georgia.

The dialogue between Cassie and the narrator quoted above speaks to parallel stories that run through the book and are referred to in the title of this paper. One story is the narrator’s account of his attempt to make sense of a cryptic family history from the contexted discourse of conversations he hears or takes part in. When he tells Cassie, “No I wasn’t,” he is aware that there is something missing from her story, something he doesn’t yet understand about the bits and pieces of information his relations give him about their past. The other story is the author’s engagement with the tragic history of Cherokee removals, “the trail of tears.” For King, Cherokee history is an extension of family history. Story and history come together in the person of Monroe Swimmer, a central character in the book.

Monroe Swimmer is a “big time Indian artist” who returns to Truth and Bright Water after making his name in Toronto and working at restoring works of art for museums. He evokes contemporary Canadian “trickster” artists Gerald McMaster, Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, Jane Ash Poitras, Shelly Niro and many others (see Ryan). In the book, Lucille Rain remembers him as “a bit of a joker” (25). She tells the story of how he showed up for Indian Days wearing elkhide shorts and playing a tuba, “pretending to be the Bright Water German Club”: “He said it was the least he could do, seeing as how Germans were so keen on dressing up like Indians” (25).

Swimmer is a coyote/trickster, a master of reversals, and an actor in the archetypal earth diver creation story. He is also a link between the narrator’s family story and Indian history. He turns out to be central to the secret that Tecumseh’s mother and her sister Cassie share, as well as central to the author’s re-writing and reversal of Indian removals. Like coyote in *Green Grass, Running Water*, he is rumored to have left town because he “had gotten someone pregnant” (26). Besides being a family and tribal legend in the narrator’s world, the name of Swimmer also invokes King’s Cherokee heritage. Swimmer was a Cherokee healer who in 1887 showed anthropologist James Mooney a book of sacred formulas written in the syllabary devised by Sequoyah in 1821.<sup>3</sup> As Mooney discovered and King reiterates, Indians can own both orality and literacy, story and history. Mooney wrote that:

These formulas had been handed down orally from a remote antiquity until the early part of the present century, when the invention of the Cherokee syllabary enabled the priests of the tribe to put them into writing. The same invention made it possible for their rivals, the missionaries, to give to the Indians the Bible

in their own language, so that the opposing forces of Christianity and shamanism alike profited by the genius of Sikwaya. (308)

In the novel, Monroe Swimmer takes back power from the missionaries by purchasing the “Sacred Word Gospel Church” and painting it back into the prairie landscape.

Like Gerald McMaster in his painting entitled “Shaman explaining the theory of transformation to cowboys” (Ryan 30-31), this big-time Indian artist has the power to restore the whiteman’s sacred word to its proper place by making it disappear into oral tradition. Swimmer’s first name is Monroe. President James Monroe is a key figure in the shared American/Indian history of Cherokee removals. The two names are in tension like the names of cowboys and Indians in McMaster’s “The Cowboy/Indian Show” (Ryan). In 1817 Monroe wrote future President Andrew Jackson that

The hunter or savage state requires a greater extent of territory to sustain it, than is compatible with the progress and just claims of civilized life, and must yield to it. (Prucha 65)

In 1824 Monroe said in his annual message to Congress “that there was only one solution to the Indian problem: the Indians must be induced to move west” (Washburn 44).

Monroe Swimmer is a “big artist,” who activates the stories of both his names to reverse the painful history of Cherokee removal from their homeland. By a clever shift of syntax, he transforms Indians from the subject of removals into agents of their own re-creation. Swimmer’s actions evoke the Ghost Dance teachings of the Paiute prophet, Wovoka, which were also documented by Mooney. Wovoka foretold that the whitemen would disappear, the ancestors return, and the buffalo repopulate the prairies. Swimmer’s painting literally removes the colonial past from the perceptual environment. Swimmer also realizes Wovoka’s prophesy by placing iron cutout images of buffalo back on the land, where they come alive and begin to move out onto the prairie.<sup>4</sup> Swimmer knows the efficacy of sacred formulas. He knows that truth and bright water are a single country, Indian country.

### **Wait for the Signs**

The narrator of the book does not have to explain his own name or that of Monroe Swimmer, nor does he have to articulate exactly what the names of the Horns or the Shield mean. Like any storyteller in a small-scale society, he does not have to name all his relations other than by the occasional kin term embedded in quoted dialogue. The narrator tells his story as he sees

and hears it. His own internal voice creates a setting for the extensive quotations of the book. It is this dialogue that provides clues to the various mysteries of the book for reader and narrator alike. Some of what the narrator sees and hears makes no sense whatsoever to him, and even less to the reader at the time he recounts them. The narrator and his cousin, Lum, see a mysterious woman throw a child's skull into the Shield from the Horns. Only at the end of his story has he assembled enough evidence to say to himself, "I see what I should have seen before" (249). Only at the end of the story may the reader come to the same realization. Both narrator and reader will do best to "stay calm, be brave and wait for the signs."<sup>5</sup>

Throughout his narrative, Tecumseh reports snatches of conversation between his mother and his auntie Cassie that he cannot figure out. *Truth & Bright Water* is largely constructed of such conversations. In one scene Tecumseh's mother gives Cassie a suitcase full of what he thinks are his old baby clothes:

"So,' says my mother, 'you going to say anything to him?'" The reference to "him" is not entirely clear from the immediate context. Cassie had mentioned the narrator's father, Elvin, previously, but apparently as part of a question about his helping her sister with the shop. The reference may be to someone else, someone that both parties to the conversation may or may not acknowledge without having to name.

"Like what?" says auntie Cassie.  
 "Maybe he'll want to help." (112)

She then goes on to say:

"If it were me," says my mother, "I'd say something."  
 "That's because you're a romantic," says auntie Cassie.  
 "Nothing wrong with a little romance," says my mother.  
 "Lasts about as long as cut flowers," says auntie Cassie.

The narrator's mother asks:

"What are you going to do now?"

And Cassie replies:

"What I always do." (113-114)

The above passages and much of the book's quoted dialogue illustrate what linguist Edward Hall calls "high context" messages. According to Hall, "the more information is shared . . . the higher the context" (56-57). Highly contexted discourse assumes that the communicants share knowledge and mutual understandings. As I have noted elsewhere, "discourse within an oral

culture is highly contextualized and based on complex mutually understood (and unstated) knowledge” (Ridington “Dogs” 179). Cassie and the narrator’s mother are obviously talking about shared but unstated information. They refer to “he” and “him” without having to name the object of their discourse. Their conversation makes perfect sense to them, and little or no sense to the narrator at the time he overhears it. In due course, the signs will fall into place. With luck, further conversations will have a reflexive relationship to this one, until a pattern appears and he figures out what his mother and his auntie Cassie knew all along. When he understands, he experiences an epiphany (249).

King’s characters traverse both physical and temporal borders. While the narrator tells his story in the present tense, he refers back reflexively to events that he and his relations remember from the past. Experiences that did not make sense to him as they happened come into focus as the story develops. He quotes the voices of his mother, grandmother and auntie Cassie, and then returns to place their stories in a larger context. Each new story and experience has a reflexive relationship to all those that went before. As the novel progresses, both narrator and reader piece together clues embedded in the stories and story fragments that his mother, father, uncle, aunt and grandmother reveal in their own context-dependent conversations.

The narrator and all his relations are storytellers in the oral tradition. While the reader-listener may be a bit behind in interpreting the signs distributed through the narrated dialogue, he or she will eventually share in the narrator’s epiphany and “see what I should have seen before.” Tecumseh’s narrative present makes sense in terms of the narrated past, in the same way that traditional First Nations stories have always informed present experience. In any small-scale society where every life is known to others as a story, transformation of personal experience into culturally recognized knowledge is a powerful medium for bonding people to one another with meaning. The art of telling secrets is an important medium of communication in communities where people know one another from living together interdependently (Ridington, “Telling Secrets”).

Each story the narrator hears makes sense in relation to the larger story of which it is a part. One good story articulates with every other story. Every story is at once a fragment and an entirety. Each one hints at every other. Stories function as metonyms, parts that stand for wholes. Stories in the First Nations traditions I am familiar with are parts of a highly contextualized discourse that assumes familiarity with biography and shared experience. They

are episodic interrelated vignettes performed by a knowledgeable narrator.

Besides the mystery of the skull, which he shares with his cousin Lum, the narrator struggles to piece together what happened to his mother and his auntie Cassie in “another time, another life,” a phrase he hears from his father (188), his mother (207), and from Cassie as “another life, another time” (245). The mystery has something to do with baby clothes and birthdays. He puzzles at Cassie sending him girl’s toys in July, since he is a boy and his birthday is in April (118). Tecumseh reports several versions of a story about his mother and Cassie, when they were young, switching clothes and hairdos on a double date with two guys. When he first overhears them telling the first version of the story, he thinks the guys must have been his father, Elvin, and Lum’s father, Franklin Heavy Runner (94). Even in the first telling, the story twists and veers:

“That night in The Lodge,” auntie Cassie would begin. “You wore that white dress.”

“Long time ago,” said my mother. “Not much point in digging up the past.”

“I wore that red dress,” said auntie Cassie, and she would begin to laugh.

“You had your hair up, and I had mine down.” (94)

In the next breath, Cassie seems to reverse herself by saying that in the switch, “Yours went up . . . and mine went down” (95). Red and white are important colours in Cherokee symbolism. Red indicates success and triumph; white indicates peace and happiness.

Each telling of a story makes it new and different. In “How I Spent my Summer Vacation: History, Literature, and the Cant of Authenticity,” King writes about his encounter with a storyteller named Bella at the Blood Sun Dance:

Bella, if she exists, believes that history and story are the same. She sees no boundaries, no borders, between what she knows and what she can imagine. Everything is story, and all the stories are true. (252)

When Tecumseh first hears auntie Cassie’s story about how she and his mother switched identities, “I figured that the other guy was Franklin and that after the switch, auntie Cassie wound up with my father and my mother wound up with Franklin.” He especially liked “the best part” when “Franklin took my mother’s hand and announced that this was the woman he was going to marry” (95).

Later on, he hears another version of the story from his mother. This time, it takes on an entirely different meaning:

“I’ll bet dad and uncle Franklin were surprised.”

“Franklin:” says my mother. “Franklin wasn’t there.”



Elvin, she says, was with Cassie. "Then who were you with?" he asks.

Even before I ask the question, I know the answer.

"Monroe Swimmer?"

"Another time," says my mother. "Another life." (207)

In addition to the mystery about auntie Cassie sending girl's birthday presents in July, there is the matter of a suitcase full of baby clothes that Tecumseh first thinks are his but turn out not to be. As they go through the baby clothes, Cassie and his mother are also looking at old photographs. Tecumseh finds them strewn "all over the floor and on the kitchen table" (119).

"There are a couple of older black and white photographs of auntie Cassie and my mother with two men. One of the guys is my father" (119). He doesn't say or know at the time who the other guy is. There is also a picture of a newborn baby:

I figure it's me, only the hair doesn't look quite right. In all my other baby pictures, I have a head of black hair that sticks up in all directions, but in this picture, I don't have much hair at all, and it all lies down neatly against my head. On the back of the photograph, someone has tried to write something but the paper is slick and most of what was there has disappeared. All I can make out is a "J" and an "L" and the number one. (120)

The narrator does not report on his attempts to decipher the text fragment or whether, in fact, he ever resolved this particular mystery. The author leaves the exegesis up to the reader.

This reader went around for days, weeks, trying to come up with the missing information until, quite literally in the middle of the night, I woke up and knew it had to be July 1, Canada Day. That would be the birthday of Cassie's daughter, the one she was thinking of when she sent her nephew girl's toys in July. When the narrator's grandmother comes right out and says to Cassie, "I suppose this is about Mia . . . things go quiet then as if somebody has done something rude and no one wants to admit that they did it" (54). Then when she adds that, "Monroe Swimmer is back in town," Cassie clenches her tattooed hand. The tattooed letters are another text for Tecumseh to decipher. "The letters on the knuckles are pulled tight and stand out against the skin. AIM" (55-56).

From the perspective of a fifteen-year-old boy, the tattoos on Cassie's fingers must stand for "American Indian Movement" and they feed his story about Cassie having been a young radical. In fact, his reading of the text is reversed. When Tecumseh later writes AIM on his own knuckles and asks Cassie, "Is this how you did it?" she replies, "No . . . When I did this, I was

drunk and I did it in a mirror” (229). The letters spell out the name of Cassie’s lost daughter. They can also be read as “missing in action.”

July 1 is not only the birthday of Cassie’s lost child. It is also Canada’s birthday and it is the date of “Indian Days” in Bright Water. Canada’s days revert to being Indian days when Indians become active agents of their own history and begin to remove the institutions of colonial oppression. When Monroe Swimmer returns to Truth and Bright Water and takes over the Sacred Word Gospel Church, Indian removals take on a new meaning.

### **This According to Tom King’s Contexted Discourse**

While the context of the narrator’s discourse includes his friends and relations and visitors to Truth and Bright Water, the author’s context brings in the wider range of characters, situations and literatures that make up his world. The narrator’s story and that of the author converge in the same way that story and history converge. The author knows that Bella was right. History and story are the same. There are no boundaries, no borders, between what you know and what you can imagine. Everything is story, and all the stories are true. The author transgresses conventional boundaries between the personal and the historical. His stories include his own family, friends, and colleagues, as well as figures from myth and, most importantly, characters from Indian history and literature.

Some characters in the author’s story bring together family and myth. For example, a third of the way into the book, Cassie addresses the narrator’s mother by name. “Jesus, Helen,” she says. “Where are the windows?” (112). At the most immediate level, the name is a nod to King’s partner and colleague, Helen Hoy. At another level, though, the author’s use of the name ties the story to Helen of Troy, a semi-mythic character from King’s Greek heritage. Cassie, of course, turns out to be Cassandra. The first and only time we hear her full name is when the narrator’s father tells him, “And don’t believe everything Cassandra tells you either” (210).

Helen and Cassandra are sisters in the book. In Greek history, Helen and Cassandra are sisters-in-law. Helen, the wife of Menelaus, has an affair with Paris of Troy while Cassandra, his sister, refuses the advances of Apollo and is condemned to be eternally disbelieved. Troy falls because the Trojans refuse to believe her warning about the wooden horse. Helen survives the war and returns to her husband, while Cassandra and her captor, Agamemnon, are both killed by Aegisthus and Clytemnestra, thus initiating the Oresteia cycle of tragic stories.

By naming his characters as he does, the author plays stories and histories in relation to one another. He reminds us that the Trojan War, after all, came about because of a traumatic event in family history.

### **Ghosts**

Even Tecumseh's dog, Soldier, carries a cultural and historical message. A reader familiar with Plains Indian culture knows that the Dog Soldiers are people willing to sacrifice their lives in defense of the camp. Tecumseh reports what his grandmother said about dogs and ghosts, which is essential information for understanding both the metaphor of dog soldier and the dog Soldier's relation to a group of Cherokees who come into the story "on their way to Oklahoma":

"In the old days," she told me, "dogs helped to guard the camp."

"Against Soldiers?"

"Other things too."

"Like what?"

"Ghosts," said my grandmother. "They watched out for ghosts." (39)

The ghosts his grandmother spoke of show up in several guises. First, there is the child's skull that Lum and Tecumseh retrieve after a "mysterious woman" throws it into the Shield. Near the end of his story, Tecumseh is able to tell his cousin that the mysterious woman was actually Monroe Swimmer in disguise. "It was you," Tecumseh tells Swimmer. "I see what I should have seen before" (249). The child's skull they retrieved from the Shield was one of many that Swimmer liberated from museums during the course of his work restoring paintings.

"Monroe rescues them from museums," I tell Lum.

"Cool." Lum cradles the skull in his arms and smooths the bone with the sleeve of his shirt.

"Anthropologists stick them in drawers," I say. "Monroe steals them back." (254)

The spirits of this child and other lost children resonate throughout the book. One of these lost children is Lum, who identifies with the skull. Initially, he thought it was a lost child abandoned by its mother:

"Did you think she was going to come back . . . Did you really think she was going to come back?" . . .

"She throws you away, and you think she's going to come back." Lum rubs the skull against his face. "Silly baby," he says. "Silly baby." (176)

The image of the lost mother connects to Silko's novel, *Ceremony*, which turns around a quest for the lost corn mother whose absence has held back

the life-giving rains. Another lost mother and child are Cassie and her daughter, Mia.

The Cherokees who show up for Indian Days and stay in the band's "Happy Trails" trailer park are another set of ghostly presences. They are real characters from Cherokee history, and it is appropriate that the trailer park's name is an inversion of their "trail of tears." It is also a reference to part-Choctaw cowboy Roy Rogers, whose signature sign-off was the song, "Happy Trails To You," and whose informal title, "The King of the Cowboys," happens to resonate with the author's name. Soldier bristles whenever he is near the Cherokees. He experiences them as ghosts who still journey along the trail of tears. Finally, there is the ghostly trio of half wild dogs, "The Cousins," who live up by the abandoned Sacred Word Gospel Church. Their name may be a reference to the "Cherokee Cousins," an organization devoted to helping people prove Cherokee ancestry by reference to "Miller Roll" applications filed between 1906 and 1908 (Cherokee Cousins accessed 04/16/00).

The Cherokees who show up at Happy Trails include John Ross ("He's got the big red trailer"), George Guess ("He reads books") and a young girl named Rebecca Neugin, who looks "strange, pale and transparent" (102). John Ross (Gu wi s gu wi) was the principal chief of the Cherokee nation from 1826-1866. He could not prevent his people being removed from their homeland. George Guess (or Gist) is the English name of Sequoyah, the Cherokee who devised a syllabary for writing the Cherokee language (Washburn 46; Prucha 66). Rebecca Neugin was a girl of three during the time of removals. In 1932, at the age of 100, she described her experience to Oklahoma historian Grant Foreman:

When the soldiers came to our house my father wanted to fight, but my mother told him that the soldiers would kill him if he did and we surrendered without a fight. They drove us out of our house to join other prisoners in a stockade. After they took us away my mother begged them to let her go back and get some bedding. So they let her go back and she brought what bedding and a few cooking utensils she could carry and had to leave behind all of our other household possessions. (Perdue and Green 169)

Rebecca especially regretted having to leave her pet duck behind. More than a hundred and fifty years after her removal from Georgia, the ghosts of Rebecca and the other Cherokees are still on their way to Indian Territory. It makes sense that they should show up for Indian Days and make contact with an Indian named Tecumseh. It is no wonder that Soldier bristles at their presence. Tecumseh, whose namesake tried to create an Indian nation

along the Mississippi valley and failed, feels a special connection to Rebecca Neugin, although he does not know exactly why. Rebecca finally leaves with her people, but not before giving Tecumseh a red ribbon from her hair.

“Here,” says Rebecca, “I’ll give you this if you and your dog will help me find my duck.” (197)

Before she leaves, Rebecca begins to speak in Cherokee. “For the first time, she doesn’t look unhappy” (220). As Rebecca begins to speak, grandmother says, “Ah, . . . A Creation story. Those ones are my favorite” (220). Tom King likes creation stories too, especially ones in Cherokee.

### **A Giveaway**

*Green Grass, Running Water* was a comedy in the sense that it ends, if not with a marriage, then at least with an annunciation, a conception and the Sun Dance. *Truth & Bright Water* is tragedy that ends with the death of Lum and the faithful dog, Soldier. It is a tragedy in the same way that removing the Cherokees from their homelands and placing the bones of Indian children “in drawers and boxes and stuck away on dusty shelves” (250) are tragic assaults on Indian people. Both novels, however, end with an Indian ceremony. As Swimmer told Mooney, between 1887 and 1890 a man called “the Firekeeper” built “the honored or sacred fire” once a year, from which all the people lit fires to begin a new year. The Cherokees also had a wooden box “in which they kept the most sacred things of their old religion” (Truth or Consequences). *Truth & Bright Water* ends with Monroe Swimmer acting as firekeeper and conducting a huge giveaway for the entire community. Swimmer told Mooney that the constant fire was built on a sacred mound. Tecumseh says,

It’s still the middle of the night, but as I look east, I imagine I can see the first movements of dawn and feel the early coolness of morning air. The fire has settled into a low mound. (245)

Auntie Cassie remains standing by the fire.

Auntie Cassie opens the suitcase, takes out a small shirt, and holds it up to the light. Against the heat of the fire, the shirt looks soft and golden, and even though I’m watching, I almost miss it, the motion is so quick and casual. In the end, all I really do see is the shirt spread out and floating, bright against the night. It settles onto the embers, lies there in the fire for the longest time, and then slowly curls up at the edges, glows briefly, and is gone. (246)

Monroe asks Tecumseh,

“What do you think your auntie would like?” “I don’t know,” I say. “What do you think?” . . . Here,” he says, and he picks up an Inuit sculpture of a woman with a child on her back. “We’ll give her this.” (244)

Cassie replies, "Just be careful of what you give away . . . There are some things you want to keep" (244). Tecumseh takes the photograph from his pocket:

"Is this her?" . . . "You know . . . Mia?" "Is she someone I know?" "No," Auntie Cassie puts the photograph in her coat. "You never knew her." I wait to see if auntie Cassie is going to finish the story, but I can see that she's gone as far as she wants to go. "Another life," she says. "Another time." (245)

Following the giveaway, Monroe Swimmer removes the remaining skulls from a sacred bentwood box and initiates "the ceremony . . . for putting the bones in the river" (251). The ceremony requires ribbons to be tied to the skulls, but Swimmer has run out and Tecumseh supplies the one he received from Rebecca. "The ribbon flutters out like wings" (252). Just then, a voice comes out of the darkness saying, "Mum?" "Is that you, mum?" (252). It is Lum, who has come to believe that the mysterious woman is his mother: "It's my mother . . . She's come home" (226). Now, his own name echoes his loss: Lum, Mum.

Lum has painted his face red and black, the colours of triumph and death in Cherokee symbolism. He is prepared to enact his own personal ceremony. When Tecumseh tells him that the mysterious woman was not his mother, who died in a mysterious accident, but Swimmer, Lum begins to talk baby talk to the skull, as if to console himself by acting the role of the mother he has lost. He seems as much to be letting go of his own spirit as he is releasing the spirit of this long lost child:

"Baby wants to say goodbye." Lum holds the skull out at arm's length. He slowly opens his hand and lets the skull roll off his fingers. "Bye-bye baby," says Lum. "Bye-bye." (257)

Lum is another of the lost children. While Cassie is looking for her daughter, Lum, like Tayo in Silko's *Ceremony*, is searching for his mother. At the beginning of the story, he told Tecumseh, "I'm not going to stop until I feel like stopping" (4). Now, at the end of the broken bridge over the Shield, he repeats the statement, "I'm going to keep on going until I feel like stopping!" (258). As Lum takes charge of his destiny and picks up speed, "his body uncoils and stretches out." Soldier strains to follow him, tears his collar out of Tecumseh's hands, and "explodes out on the decking and sends me sprawling." Both disappear as "fog swirls up through the holes on the bridge" (258).

Lum's leap into the waters of the Shield plunges him and the novel into mythic time. It recreates an image from the earth diver creation stories familiar to readers of *Green Grass, Running Water*. He joins Swimmer in returning the skulls of lost children to the life-giving water of creation. In

the context of Lum as Geronimo, his return to the water suggests an identification with the Apache culture hero and monster slayer, Child of the Water (Ortiz 433) or He Was Born For Water (Farrar 19). In Apache tradition

A divine maiden [White Painted Woman] came among the people, allowed water from overhanging rocks to drip upon her head, and miraculously conceived. She bore a son, Child of the Water, and protected him from the suspicious giants by various stratagems. When the child was only four years old, he began to challenge the monsters and, in a series of daring feats, destroyed them all. (Ortiz 433)

White Painted Woman is the central figure in Isanaklesde Gotal, the Apache girl's puberty ceremony. "During the four days and nights of the rite and for four days thereafter, the girl must be addressed and referred to only as White Painted Woman" (Opler 90). Following the Apache defeat by General Miles, they were forbidden to hold their traditional ceremonies. In 1912, the federal government rescinded its order and told the people that "they could gather together as a tribe once a year to have a celebration on the fourth of July" (Farrar 134). They chose to celebrate Isanaklesde Gotal, which in earlier times had been held on summer solstice and continued to be their major world renewal ceremony. Apache girls who have begun their first menstruation the previous year run along a sacred pollen path toward the east. Upon their return, the goddess, who had grown old during the year, is made young again (Talamantez). Like King's Canadian Indians, for whom Canada Day becomes "Indian Days," the Apache reclaimed an American national holiday and made it their own.

### **More to a Study than Just the Words**

*Truth & Bright Water* is complex and tightly written. It tells a tragic story, but it also features empowerment through transformation and re-creation. Monroe Swimmer is a classic trickster, capable of realizing both his Cherokee name and the promise of Wovoka's Ghost Dance, but he also knows that the creation story begins with water. He transforms Indian Removals from an intransitive to a transitive process. When he paints over the sacred word of the missionaries, their church disappears and is replaced by open prairie. The images of buffalo he places out on the prairie begin to take on lives of their own. Like his Cherokee namesake, Swimmer applies sacred formulas to contemporary situations. Like an earth diver creation figure, he moves between sky, earth and water. His kite is named, "teaching the sky about blue" (49). He makes a platform on the prairie called "teaching the grass about green" (43). Another kite is "teaching the night about dark" (49).

He wears a tee shirt with the logo of “Monroe Shocks” (45). He plays with the borders that divide Canadian, American, Indian and Cherokee identities. He transforms Canada Day into Indian Days, and makes the event a time of ceremonial renewal.

Swimmer knows that the stories he makes are like the buffalo he places on the prairie. They have lives of their own, but they need a little help getting started. In order to keep the stories alive, he asks Tecumseh to be his minstrel:

“Minstrels sing about heroes and great deeds,” says Monroe.

“You want to be my minstrel?” . . .

“Here’s how it works. I’m the hero. and you have to make up songs and stories about me so that no one forgets who I am.” (193)

After the giveaway he reminds Tecumseh of his role as storyteller:

“When you write the song about my exploits,” says Monroe, “Don’t forget the giveaway.” (247)

His words bring to mind the opening lines of Thomas Moore’s song, “The Minstrel Boy”:

The minstrel boy to the war is gone,  
In the ranks of death you’ll find him;  
His father’s sword he hath girded on,  
And his wild harp slung behind him.<sup>6</sup>

Once Tecumseh has pieced together the story, he takes on the authorial role of minstrel. He “girds on” Swimmer’s sword. Swimmer knows that what Tecumseh’s grandmother said is true. There is more to a story than just the words. This richness resonates with what Dunne-za elder Tommy Attachie told me about songs and stories in his own tradition. “When you sing it now,” Tommy told me, “Just like new.” In *Truth and Bright Water*, Thomas King has gone beyond the words of his stories to make the events of a shared Indian history just like new. Besides being an obvious coyote, King also has the ear of a minstrel. He makes waiting for the signs worth our while.

### Epiphany

For the last month I have been obsessed with decoding the secrets of *Truth & Bright Water*. When I sent a draft of the paper to Helen Hoy she reminded me that the book is “less allusive than GGRW.” “Could have fooled me,” I thought. But she is right that the story makes sense as a story even if you don’t know all the history behind it. At a recent meeting of the Canadian Anthropology Society I found myself raving to colleagues at a Chinese restaurant about Geronimo and Canada Day and Swimmer and the



rest of my discoveries. When I paused for breath, the very sensible Liz Furniss asked an obvious question I hadn't thought of in so many words. Why doesn't King just tell a straight-up story? Why does he write about secrets that are hidden from most of his readers?

My first reaction was to say, "Don't ask me, ask him," but that begged the question, which could be framed more generally as, "How is this book, and Native literature generally, relevant to Canadian Literature?" Is King an Indian storyteller whose writing is a transformation of Aboriginal modes of discourse, or is he just another postmodern writer who happens to write about Indians because that is who some of his ancestors were? There are probably readers who hold one or another of these views on either side of the border between Indian and non-Indian identity. As you may have gathered from my argument in this paper, I think he adds an Aboriginal dimension to the western canon rather than simply using western writing strategies to describe Aboriginal experience. His work is neopremodern, not postmodern.

Besides being a work of erudition and creativity, *Truth & Bright Water* locates collective history within personal story and reveals the storied life of Indian history. Like any good story, the book challenges its reader to take an active authorial role. He or she joins the narrator in his quest to "see what I should have seen before." The book draws its reader into the history of what Indian people experienced before anyone living today was born. Rebecca Neugin was an old woman when she told the story of what happened to her at the age of three. No one alive today remembers the trail of tears from first-hand experience. Geronimo was the war shaman of a people who now conduct their most sacred world renewal ceremony on the fourth of July. In King's country, Canada Day becomes Indian Days. King is a minstrel who makes up songs and stories so that no one forgets the actuality of Indian history. Swimmer, Geronimo, Tecumseh, The Shawnee Prophet, Sequoyah, Heavy Runner, and little Rebecca Neugin come to life in the telling of King's creation story. When Thomas King sings the stories now, they become "just like new."

#### NOTES

All My Relations. Thanks to Jillian Ridington, Helen Hoy and Tom King for reading versions of this paper.

- 1 An Apache informant told Opler the following story about Geronimo:

He started to sing. There were many songs, and the songs were about Coyote. They told how Coyote was a tricky fellow, hard to see and find, and how he gave these characteristics to Geronimo so that he could make himself invisible and even turn into a doorway.

They told how the coyote helped Geronimo in his curing. Geronimo accompanied his singing with a drum which he beat with a curved stick. At the end of each song he gave a call like a coyote. (Opler 40)

- 2 An undocumented webservice says that Tecumseh's name means "Shooting Star" and his motto was, "I am the maker of my own fortune." Eckert's biography gives his name as "The Panther Passing Across" (41). In the 1930s, the Tecumseh story was appropriated by nationalistic German novelists including Karl May to promote the message that even heroic resistance will fail in the absence of racial and national unity. May's "good Indians" are ones who have been improved by Germans and Christianity (Washburn 585). A piece of King's mosaic is his story of a German tourist named Helmut May and his wife Eva, who are found dead of "exposure" in their Grand Cherokee parked out on the prairie. Blanca Chester (personal communication) suggests that Helmut may be a reference to Emma Lee Warrior's short story, "Compatriots," whose central character is Helmut Walking Eagle. Walking Eagle, in turn, suggests Adolph Hungry Wolf, a German who writes about Blackfoot culture. Chester also suggests that Eva may refer to Hitler's mistress, Eva Braun, who died with him in a Berlin bunker. The photographs in May's camera have the foreground in focus and the landscape out (King, *Truth* 155). The reference to photography recalls both King's *Medicine River* and his project of "exposing" prominent Indians by photographing them wearing Lone Ranger masks.
- 3 Sequoyah may have been physically disabled since his name (Sikwo-ye) means "Pig's Foot." He was born in 1776 near Tuskegee, Tennessee and died in 1843 near Tyler, Texas. Following Sequoyah's invention of an Indian writing system, Cherokees became literate in their own language and established a newspaper, the *Cherokee Phoenix* (Washburn 44).
- 4 The campus of the University of Lethbridge, where King headed the Native Studies department, features metal cut-outs of animals silhouetted against the prairie horizon.
- 5 I am not going to give this one away entirely, but CBC listeners will know what I am talking about.

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