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Green Grass, Running Water: Theorizing the World of the Novel

When I tell the story,
  a lot of times I like to tell something,
  then I find that I switch to another one.
And I couldn't help it.
  I got to tell that.
In that way, it takes longer.
But they important stories anyway.
HARRY ROBINSON[1]

Dialogic Interactions

Thomas King's short story collection *One Good Story, That One* and his novel *Green Grass, Running Water* both pay homage to the distinctive voice of the Okanagan storyteller, Harry Robinson. *Green Grass, Running Water* also provides a thoroughgoing critique of the literary theories of Northrop Frye, literary theories that dominated Canadian and Anglo-American literary criticism between the publication of *Anatomy of Criticism* in 1957 to Frye's death in 1991. The influence of Robinson's voice is clear in King's own (written) storytelling. But the oral tradition out of which Robinson speaks is both a mode of artistic expression, incorporating principles and aesthetics of Native verbal art, and part of a broader social context. Above all, the stories, as Robinson observes, should be enjoyed. "That is how you learn," he says, "That is, if you enjoy the stories" (*Nature Power* 8). When Robinson tells stories, he is theorizing the world. His storytelling ultimately moves beyond either written or spoken word to tell us something about life as he has experienced it. The stories reveal knowledge as narrative. Moreover, they show how Robinson's world is experienced through several language and cultural systems—Okanagan, English, oral and written, for example.

His collections of stories, *Write It On Your Heart* and *Nature Power*, are part of the dialogue between those languages and cultural systems. *Green Grass, Running Water*, a co(s)mic creation narrative told from a First Nations (Coyote) perspective, uses humour to create another sort of dialogue, a dialogue between oral and written, between Native and Christian creation stories, and between literary and historical discourses.

Like Robinson, King writes theory by telling, or in this case, writing, stories. King draws from oral tradition to incorporate aspects of Native storytelling into a highly contextualized and literate novel. A substantial source of King's reworking of oral storytelling performance within the context of "high" literature, I suggest, originates in the stories of Harry Robinson. While Robinson "tells" us theory, King writes theory by telling stories within what appears to be a post-modern novel. The novel itself mirrors Lee Maracle's claim that theory cannot be separated from story. She says that, "There is a story in every line of theory" (88). King's apprehension in *Green Grass, Running Water* of theory as narrative, or as narrativized, also emphasizes the differences between Native and non-Native ways of knowing the world. He brings together Western theory and Native theory in a way that creates a dialogue between the two.

King's storytelling is saturated in dialogue; the storied dialogues shared between writer and readers resemble and resonate with the kinds of dialogues that storyteller and audience share in oral storytelling performances. Native storytellers like Robinson and King theorize their world by telling stories. Their theory, therefore, is interactive and dialogic, rather than monologic. This kind of Native literary theory sees novels as an open genre. The first part of this paper examines some of the connections between Native oral tradition and King's writing, and suggests the continuity of Native oral tradition within the novelistic form. King uses an interactive and dialogic literary theory to dismantle the kind of theory that sees novels as closed systems. He writes Northrop Frye and structuralist literary poetics into *Green Grass, Running Water*, for example, in a way that suggests viewing Western theory through the lens of Native experience and traditions, rather than the other way around. What if, instead of reading the novel as a literary exercise, one reads it in the context of oral storytelling tradition? What happens if one takes for granted, as Robinson does, that stories are real? What if one assumes that Natives have always been writing novels in one way or another?

Robinson's literary influence on King was, as King himself says, "inspirational."[2] When one reads King's earlier novel, *Medicine River*, and compares it with *Green Grass, Running Water*, Robinson's impact is obvious. Changes in the style of the dialogue, including the way King's narrator seems to address readers and characters directly (using the first person), in the way traditional characters and stories from Native cultures (particularly Coyote) are adapted, and especially in the way that each of the distinct narrative strands in the novel contains and interconnects with every other, reflect Robinson's storied impact. The "oral" influence of Robinson on King's writing, however, paradoxically comes through written texts.[3] This irony is perhaps reflected in King's own multi-faceted translations and recreations of various stories and characters from different Native cultural traditions. King connects Robinson's Okanagan Coyote with stories from the Blackfoot[4] of Alberta, and the traditions of Thought Woman (Pueblo), First Woman (Navajo), Old Woman (Blackfoot, Dunne-za), and Changing Woman (Navajo).[5] As Robin Ridington observes of these kinds of culture stories and culture heroes, "They are parts and they are wholes in conversation with each other" (n.p.). The conversation between these narratives in *Green Grass, Running Water* is framed with no real beginning, no middle, and no end—it is a continuous cycle that is always beginning again, as the world itself is constantly being re-created, through story.

King's narrator, the "I" of the text, addresses the reader directly: "you," like Robinson's listening audience, are drawn into the performance, and are ultimately transformed into another character in one of King's stories. Through the process of reading one becomes part of a storied world. The reader, like Robinson's listening audience, thus becomes an active participant in the process of constructing "the text." The various written dialogues that are created and carried on throughout *Green Grass, Running Water* suggest a dialogism that reflects oral tradition and First Nations and Native American perspectives of the world. The world is always brought into being, or created, through story.

The word "dialogism" also brings to mind Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the novel itself as an unfinished, developing genre; he suggests a view of the novelistic genre as dialogic process rather than literary product. To get a dialogue really going, however, one needs an intimate relationship between those who speak and those who listen. Dialogue by its nature thus privileges local and regional narratives over universal and global meta-narratives.

When that dialogue is presented as a First Nations conversation between Native storytelling traditions and a literary novel, it reveals how a storyteller approaches each telling of a story as simultaneously new and old.[6] It reveals a dialogue with the past that moves into the present, a history of Native tradition that now includes European elements within it.

Green Grass, Running Water plays with chaos. It resists externally imposed structures from Western cultural and literary traditions and it juxtaposes Native oral traditions against Western written traditions. Native stories interconnect with the literary works of American and Canadian authors like Melville, Hawthorne, Cooper, and Frye, among others, with the Christian creation story, mainstream history, and with a host of storied icons from popular culture, including John Wayne and Marilyn Monroe. By juxtaposing these different narratives, fragmented texts contextualize each other, creating meaning in gaps that cannot be read linearly. Consequently, another voice "speaks" to the reader: Native reality consistently intrudes on the carefully constructed realities of Western tradition. By drawing on his or her knowledge of different characters, events, and discourses, the reader is drawn into apparent chaos and confusion to become part of the performance. By playing on the interconnectedness of a wide range of stories, King shows how meaning is always process-driven and consensual—how it is inherently dialogic.

The conversation that King sets up between oral creation story, biblical story, literary story, and historical story resembles the dialogues that Robinson sets up in his storytelling performances. These include the incorporation of modern-day European elements into old stories—telling us how Coyote's son and Neil Armstrong both traveled to the moon, for example, and how white people were already there at the time of the Okanagan creation. Ridington notes, "Conversation between the myriad human and non-human persons of a storied world is at the heart of Native American poetics" (n.p.).The intimate relationship between human and non-human worlds of experience is reflected in King's novel where Coyotes and dogs "commune" with Old Woman, Thought Woman, and Changing Woman. Ridington, however, uses the word poetics to mean more than just the formal properties of the text; he uses it "to mean the ways in which people create meaning through language" (n.p.). This meaning, as Bakhtin suggests, lies in dialogue. Since Native American poetics, through oral tradition, emphasizes dialogue and dialogism, why wouldn't we, in the

twentieth century, expect Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne, James Fenimore Cooper, Northrop Frye, John Wayne and the Lone Ranger to turn up in a novel written by a First Nations author?

But Melville, Cooper, and Frye are written into *Green Grass, Running Water* in a way that suggests they are part of contemporary Native literary tradition. It is their presentation as part of a particular narrative perspective, however, that constructs them in this way. King translates stories from the Bible, as well as canonical Canadian and American literary texts into the context of a Native novel. The issue of translation is particularly complicated because, in this instance, both "sides" of the translation use the same language—English—but they are not necessarily writing out of the same cultural traditions. First Nations texts with highly literate contexts can create dialogues with a wide variety of other contexts, just as orally told stories constantly absorb and transform their own context.

King's Dr. Hovaugh, for example, focuses on how "In the beginning all this was land. Empty land" (78). Hovaugh's story suggests the European conceptualization of Canada as empty wilderness—a land devoid of everything, including Indians, before the whites arrive. Hovaugh then tells what he considers the "long and boring story" of how "our" Indians came to be at the mental institution (78). Canadians, of course, have long considered their history (and literature) as "boring," especially when compared to those of their neighbours to the south. Babo, in contrast, tells a Native story of creation, beginning with how Thought Woman falls from the sky (75-76). This story has its source in storytelling tradition, in fiction, while Hovaugh's focuses on the "facts" as he sees them. Babo, the four old Indians, and Coyote, all point out the importance of getting the story right. Stories are powerful entities. When the story is not quite right, Babo repeats it, noting, "That's not right either. I better start at the beginning again" (76). But just as Babo and the four old storytellers never know where to begin their narratives, they never quite get to the end of them either. The stories defy teleology as they float from one place in the text to another, continually generating new meanings.

Babo has told Sergeant Cereno earlier that the escaped Indians were women, not men. They are, in fact, Indian goddesses who tell stories and, through the stories, create realities. Babo's favourite is the creation story. This story, however, like the story of the old Indians themselves, keeps escaping the confines of Western tradition—just as the old Indians slip

away from Dr. Hovaugh's cultivated garden. It is the same story that King, or his narrator, is telling us now. But the question of who, exactly, is narrating the story is a slippery one. Is it Coyote, the "I," of the text, or is it King himself? The ambiguity that surrounds this narrator reflects the problematic underpinnings of Native identity: who really is speaking and how is s/he situated in the text, and in the community?

King situates himself carefully as a storyteller. He tells a Native story within the context of what he knows (academic discourse, literature, history, popular culture, and so on) and is careful *not* to tell us about certain things. The Sundance, for example, is alluded to but not described, and it is pointed out that recording and photography are forbidden. These small pieces of information are revealed throughout the narrative, but it is left to the reader to connect them with King's role as a member of the Native community.

Circling the Bush Garden

Green Grass, Running Water requires participants, readers, to interact with it. In dialogue with the text, the reader moves between the world of the novel and the world as experienced. The open-ended and dialogic quality of the storytelling contrasts with the literary theory of one of King's central characters, Dr. Joe Hovaugh, whom King models on Northrop Frye. As one reads the different stories within *Green Grass, Running Water*, it becomes more and more clear how interconnected they are, and how difficult it is to separate one from another. Their web-like interconnectedness, and their ability to absorb new elements, implies a system of thought that is inclusive rather than exclusive. This is an open work of literature, rather than a closed one.

Hovaugh's unease with the Canadian (literary) landscape leads, King's narrative suggests, to his compulsion to search out "occurrences, probabilities, directions, deviations" (39). Through the character of Hovaugh, *Green Grass, Running Water* alludes in a variety of ways to Frye's extensive schematization of literature in books such as *The Anatomy of Criticism, The Great Code*, and *The Bush Garden*. The narrator observes how Hovaugh felt that "Things in Canada seemed slightly wild, more out of hand, disorderly, even chaotic. There was an openness to the sky and a wideness to the land that made him uncomfortable" (260). Frye has written extensively of a "garrison mentality" that permeates Canadian literature. The wild physical environment (or nature, of which Indians are seen as a part and settlers are not) is ominous seen from a (civilized) perspective. In an attempt to create order

from out of potential literary chaos, out of wildness, Frye schematizes and classifies literature. But Frye's structuralist theory reveals a closed system. Meaning, whether in literary texts or in general, arises from relationships between elements within the system. It is based on oppositions, and the referent, the "real" world, exists somewhere outside the system. Thus the literary text has less to say about the outside world than it does about some thing called "literariness."

Frye's emphasis on the structural and synchronic elements of a text, and his emphasis on the importance of archetypes and myths rather than history, suggest, among other things, that historical progression has ended. Hovaugh's mystical and reclusive retreat to his mythical garden also suggests his own escape into timelessness, into a world of his own mythic making. Ironically, however, the four Indians have also managed to slip away from the confines of linear and chronological time to create their own histories, their own versions of reality. In *Green Grass, Running Water*, Hovaugh develops maps and charts, and correlates natural catastrophes to the old Indians' various escapes from his institution. The events of the old Indians' narrative history, however, are important to him only because they function to reveal the system as a whole. For Hovaugh, it is the pattern that is crucial. "It's a pattern," he says of the Indians' disappearance and he struggles to make sense of that pattern in terms that he can understand (40). The possibility that he has contributed to the catastrophes that the old Indians cause because of his inability to see them for who they are never enters his mind. The Indians "fix" things—disrupting Hovaugh's patterns—because they need to restore some balance to a world where Natives and their ways no longer seem to exist, and where white monologues have taken over.

Dr. Joe Hovaugh is not only Northrop Frye, but also Jehovah, able to describe (from above) a mythical Biblical creation and divination (*The Great Code*). He cultivates his garden of literary theory carefully in Canada, lest wildness take over (*The Bush Garden*). He then charts his course towards Parliament Hill using the "literal, allegorical, tropological, and anagogic" (*Green Grass* 324) modes of literary expression that Frye develops in *The Anatomy of Criticism* (72). In the place of a wild and chaotic land, Hovaugh has created a carefully manicured garden where tropes and conventions behave as they should. The problem is that the Native keeps going wild. And just as the four old Indians keep escaping the confines of Western institutionalization, King's text self-consciously defies categorization in Frye's terms.

In Frye's schema, the mythical mode operates out of the grammar of mythical archetypes. Myth provides a universal model of literature, but only within a structuralist universe. This mythical mode then aligns itself with the language of literature. Collectivity, history, and culture are not parts of this discourse; reality lies outside the system. But, in *Green Grass, Running Water* floating imagery replaces mythic archetypes. The reader experiences history continuously beginning and ending, beginning and ending again, through a series of cycles. The distinctions between myth and story, and between myth and reality, in these cycles of narrative, collapse as Coyote dreams stories into reality.

When Coyote dances in and out of creation stories (244) anything is possible. As Coyote thinks or dreams up something, anything can happen: reality *is* changed. For Frye, however, form is more important than (real) content. And satire requires both humour and "an object of attack" (Frye *Anatomy* 223-25). The Native American writer, Gerald Vizenor, however, argues that the comic operates at a collective, rather than individual, level. Native satire appears to be something different from what Frye describes. It is always connected to the trickster. This satire has an attitude that Vizenor describes in *Narrative Chance* as comic, and it is based on what he describes as chance, rather than system. When Vizenor argues that the trickster is based on chance, he connects Native satire with post-modernist notions of fragmentation, de-privileging unity in favour of the locally and regionally specific. The trickster always works from out of chaos rather than within an ordered system.

Coyote's dance constantly requires the "I" of the narrator to participate in the collective performance of storytelling. King's recreation of myth and the idea of mythic archetypes to include stories and icons from popular culture, stories from the Bible, and from canonical literary works, reconstructs the idea of myth as part of a changing and vital tradition. Myths contain storied realities. Coyote myths play with chaos—with the narrative chance that Vizenor argues also "lessens the power of social science and humanism" (192)—and defy schematization. Thus, King's kind of mythic literature runs counter to a Western literary tradition that is built on "occurrences and probabilities and deviations" of "literal, allegorical, tropological, anagogic" modes of expression.

Even symbols, which Frye describes as "any unit of any literary structure that can be isolated for critical attention" (*Anatomy* 71) mean something

culturally different in *Green Grass, Running Water.* When questioned about the meaning of the floating imagery, the "I" of the narrator simply says, "That's the way it happens in oral stories" (293). Archetypal figures like God, and Adam and Eve are transformed to fit their new situations. They consequently engage in dialogue with a Native creation. This kind of dialogic creation contrasts with the structuralist approach of disregarding situation or context (locally specific Native literature, history, and culture, for example) in favour of the universal archetype. Frye says, "In all literary verbal structures the final direction of meaning is inward. In literature the standards of outward meaning are secondary" (*Anatomy* 74). In such a closed system, myths and archetypes are universalized categories, just as the Indian becomes a kind of universal archetype for Hovaugh. Consequently he is unable to describe the Indians who have lived with him for years, and he cannot even guess at how old they are.

In Hovaugh's carefully constructed world, meaning lies in circular and closed systems. Thus he draws a "deliberate circle around Parliament Lake." He then draws another, and another (324). King's narrator then describes Indian "gifts" and white "gifts" for us (327), defining each in a play on paradigmatic opposites (327). Real Indians don't exist in this system. But in the novel Hovaugh's organization of the world ultimately reveals itself as petrified and static. His is a world where circles are no longer cycles—where circles construct borders around knowledge. His world, unlike the world of the old Indians, exhibits a garrison mentality.

The differences between the four old Indians are as substantial as their similarities. For one thing, they all come from different Native cultures. But the differences between them are finally like the differences between white and Native. King sets them up in such a way—through chance—that the oppositions refuse to fully reconstitute themselves. All kinds of differences show themselves as interconnected, rather than opposed to each other. And it is through storied dialogues that that they reveal their connections.

Frye, the story of *Green Grass, Running Water* suggests, plays God with literature just as Hovaugh plays God with the lives of the Indians. In *Anatomy of Criticism,* Frye argues that the context of literature is not the world. But the stories that the old Indians tell keep slipping into the world as experienced, into reality. Literature, in a structuralist system, rarely reveals new content or experience, but merely new ways of perception. This inward movement is related to the aesthetic: Frye states, "The reason for

producing the literary structure is apparently that the inward meaning, the self-contained verbal pattern, is the field of responses connected with pleasure, beauty, and interest" (*Anatomy* 74). And he goes on, "In literature . . . the reality-principle is subordinate to the pleasure-principle" (*Anatomy* 75). The illusion of reality is created through the construction of universal, and psychologically real archetypes. The old Indians, according to Hovaugh, are, therefore, "really" dead. But in King's narrative, stories create reality; words have the power to affect the world in ways that go beyond "pleasure, beauty, and interest." And so the old Indians live on.

Hovaugh, however hard he tries, cannot make any real sense out of the patterns that the old Indians make. Part of the confusion lies in his apparent unwillingness to acknowledge that the old Indian archetypes might be "real." As they would in oral tradition, the old Indians in *Green Grass, Running Water* keep turning up in new forms and new guises, re-creating reality as they go along. In distinguishing between oral and literate modes of discourse, Frye separates literary (figurative) and "ordinary" uses of language.[7] Literally, the old Indians should no longer exist. But the belief in a literal language can encourage and deceive one into believing in the transparency and objectivity of language as a form of neutral communication. In contrast, within a self-consciously metaphoric (and metonymic) worldview such as Robinson's and King's, no division between the literal and figurative seems to exist. Coyote is here and now. The story that one tells here and now can have repercussions somewhere else. Linguistic objectivity is not taken for granted. Language is always subjective, always contexted, and always material.

In *Green Grass, Running Water*, the literary world and the real world are inseparable, just as in Robinson's stories human and animal worlds and story and reality are interconnected. As King's characters fall into other stories, other realities, they move between narrative forms, and between media: Alberta, Charlie, and Lionel are watching the same movie Western that Eli is reading. The four Indians from the mental institution are in the televised movie story too. The four Goddesses have fixed the movie, fixed things for the benefit of the Indians, but they have to harmonize things again because the cavalry keeps returning (186). Whites keep tipping the balance—dialogue keeps becoming monologue, the text suggests. The story has to change so that reality changes. Here is a realism that theorizes the world through storytelling.

Oral stories, literature, film, and reality contaminate each other's narratives. As the author/narrator inserts himself into the story (the "I" of *Green Grass, Running Water*), he moves between narrative events and what appear to be narrativized storytelling performances. In the outer frame is the Coyote story where Hawkeye, Ishmael, Robinson Crusoe, and the Lone Ranger interact in an apparent storytelling circle. This story ends, only to begin again. This story permeates and slips into the narrative where Alberta, Charlie, and Lionel are trying to get on with their lives in Blossom, Alberta. King creates a dialogue between different cultural stories. He shows us that the question of otherness is a question of perspective. What we think of as otherness or difference is always relational; multiple characters, stories, and theories contextualize each other in the real world in meaningful ways. Ultimately, King's novel shows how First Nations storytelling continues to theorize the world through a Native literature written in English. But just as we are not accustomed to hearing stories as answers to questions, we are not accustomed to reading stories as theory.

Of Tricksters and Transformations: Language Games

By playing with stories that have no beginnings, middles, and endings, King maintains the dialogic fluidity of oral storytelling performance in a written text. These are stories influenced by oral literature in a variety of ways. In addition to the storied recursivity of the narrative as a whole, several aspects of King's translation of oral performance into writing reveal the complexity of the relationship between the English language and Native cultures. King uses the English language to translate Native worldview. But language is a kind of spatial construct. Written language separates and contains the world in specific sorts of ways, and translating between the oral and the written suggests the same kind of meaningful displacements that occur in the translation between different languages.

King manipulates the sound of certain names in a way that requires the reader to read the text out loud. He emphasizes the sound of the names as puns so that only through their aurality does the reader understand the reference. In order to "get" the reference, one has to speak the words out loud, and only then do "Louis, Ray, and Al," for example, reveal themselves as "Louis Riel"—thereby suggesting connections to yet another narrative thread. Other names that function the same way in *Green Grass, Running Water* include Joe Hovaugh (Jehovah), Sally-Jo Weyha (Sacajawea), and the

Nissan, Pinto, and Karmann-Ghia (Columbus's Niña, Pinta, and Santa Maria). In conjunction with the focus on the narratorial "I," and implied "you," of the text, such features maintain oral resonances in the process of writing. They resemble, in a highly literate context, the "interfusional" spirit of Harry Robinson's writing where, as King has observed, the stories resist being read silently (see King, "Godzilla").

The names, however, do more than insist on simple oral pronunciation. In each case, as soon as the reader enunciates the words out loud, there is the suggestion of an assumed addressee or audience. No one usually speaks to him or herself. Embedded into the importance of names, therefore, is another aspect of storytelling performance. In creating a dialogue, or conversation, with the text the speaker/reader/listener enters into a highly contexted discourse where every name suggests a story, and every story suggests yet another story. As Ridington says, "Native stories are more than about the world. They actually create it. They are parts and they are wholes in conversation with each other" (n.p.). And Dennis Tedlock notes, "Storytellers can talk *about* stories, but their observations and speculations come from accumulated experience at hearing and telling stories" (15). Thus, a storyteller's observations and speculations are often inferred and carry with them an element of presupposition. The storyteller does not tell all he or she knows, or explain the meanings of names, places, and things. There is an assumption of a common matrix of cultural knowledge, and invoking words—names and places—suggests that shared epistemology. In King's novel, that sharing covers a broad spectrum of cultural knowledge.

Joe Hovaugh's name/story resonates with the biblical senses of Jehovah, and with the literary analogies of Northrop Frye at the same time. Of course, part of that resonance also lies in the fact that Frye worked extensively with the Bible. The story of Louis, Ray, and Al connects with the narrative of Louis Riel, and also resonates with the place of Nietzschean theory in an Indian theory/story—the Dead Dog Café bringing to mind Nietzsche's famous words that "God is dead," or at least contrary in Blackfoot country.[8] It also brings to mind the nihilism inherent in the myth of the vanishing Indian. None of these stories is separable from another, and the names themselves conjure up the stories. Sometimes the stories range far apart in place and time. Their multiple interconnections imply the syncretic and transformative abilities of oral stories. They are interpreting an ever-changing world by integrating new elements into old narratives.

In one of Robinson's stories Coyote, who is not Coyote yet, has a conversation with God and chooses his name. Before he chooses his name, as Ridington points out, "Coyote embodies paradox. His name is not a name that means something. How can he have a name that is not a name and still be Coyote before he has been given it as a name?" (n.p.). The name that Coyote chooses determines his role in the world. Since he has arrived late to the "name-giving place" (*Write It* 53), he has to choose between the name KWEELSH-tin, the name for Sweathouse, and the name Shin-KLEEP, the name for Coyote (*Write It* 60). The power that he gets when he chooses to be Shin-KLEEP is the power of Coyote; the "essence" of Coyote's being cannot be separated from the word, or the name, itself. As Ridington explains it, " No matter what his name and job description, Coyote retains his essential nature."(n.p.). But Coyote's nature is one that repudiates essentialism: he has the power to change things around, to transform reality and himself, in ways that are limited only by his imaginative abilities to conjure up stories. Even his choice of a name moves away from ideas of essence, given the spiritual associations of the name for Sweathouse, the name and identity that Coyote rejects. Coyote's essential nature, it could be said, is a storied one that contains multiple realities. Stories that feature Coyote, or stories that are created by Coyote, make him who he is.

In King's story, the trouble starts with Coyote Dream choosing his name and his identity as an upper-case GOD that corresponds with the name. The discussion over names and identity at the beginning of the book resembles Robinson's story about how Coyote chooses his name and gets to be Coyote. The similarity between the two stories is so striking that it is possible King may have been inspired to write this passage by Robinson's Coyote story. One's identity, both of these narratives imply, comes out of the dialogue between words and their apparent essences, as well as through the relationship between different words and worlds of experience. In Robinson's story, Coyote only has two choices left to him. The chief tells him:

> "There's only two left,
> but you not going to have them both.
> You can have only one of them."
>
> So Shim-ee-OW didn't know what to say.
> He don't know what to do and what to say.
> So the Chief told 'em,

"All right, I can explain how you're going to be
if you're KWEELSH-tin,
that is, if you're Sweathouse.
And I can explain how you're going to do,
How you're going to be if you're shin-KLEEP."
That's Coyote.
(*WIOYH* 60)

In King's novel, Coyote and his dream argue about names and identity as well:

Who are you? Says that Dream. Are you someone important?
"I'm Coyote," says Coyote. "And I am very smart."
I am very smart, too, says that Dream. I must be Coyote.
"No," says Coyote. "You can't be Coyote. But you can be a dog."
(1-2)

In both instances there can only be one Coyote. Coyote, culture hero and trickster, however, reveals that language, words, are as deceptive and tricky as he is.

Stories are not always what they appear to be on the surface. Their form can even disguise meanings. The stories constructed through Coyote's dog dream, as they float in and out of their written contexts, play with language in a way that resembles what Vizenor describes as "trickster discourse." But unlike Vizenor's conceptualization of post-modernist trickster discourse, which, like Frye's literary theory, remains grounded in the separation between language and reality, language seems connected to material reality for King. And Coyote creates both the stories and his audience. King observes, "As Native storytellers have become bilingual—telling and writing their stories in English, French, Spanish—they have created both a more pan-Native as well as a non-Native audience" (Introduction to *All My Relations* ix). Jeannette Armstrong, in her discussion of traces of Okanagan language and worldview in her own writing, observes, "In the Okanagan language, perception of the way reality occurs is very different from that solicited by the English language. Reality is very much like a story: it is easily changeable and transformative with each speaker" (191). The development of a First Nations English that reflects Okanagan rhythms and worldview, Armstrong suggests, is more often found in colloquial and "Rez English" than it is in the formal style of academic writing. But Rez English and the idea of trickster discourse are connected, at least in part, through a collective kind of (Native) worldview. Vizenor emphasizes that the sign of

the trickster is the site of meaning because it is held in common by a community of people. But, non-Natives as well as Natives read books like *Green Grass, Running Water*, and meaning is therefore created not so much through the signs themselves as it is in the dialogue between them.

As King's narrator says, "'There are no truths, Coyote . . . Only stories'" (326). This comment, of course, is as much a reflection on the nature of truth as it is of stories. In this kind of a conceptualization of language, the referent no longer exists outside the system, but is a part of it. Signifier, signified, and referent are interconnected in a way that they are not in structuralist and post-structuralist views of language. This idea of language as real, I suggest, is closer to Native American conceptualizations of the power of words, than the idea of language as a simple "medium" of communication. Rather than mediating between different conceptualizations of reality, language in this view retains the power to influence and construct multiple realities.

Just as Coyote is instructed to "Stick around. This is how it happens" (*Green Grass* 89), the reader has to stick around. He or she has to make sense from the novel after thinking about the stories a little while. As Ridington notes, Coyote epistemology challenges us to think about signs and signification differently. The storyteller is engaging in a conversation with Coyote and with the reader. The storytelling "I" of King's text suggests the kind of doubly-oriented speech that Bakhtin argues is characteristic of the novelistic genre. Bakhtin divides doubly-oriented discourse into several categories, one of which is dialogue—described by David Lodge as a "discourse which alludes to an *absent* speech act" (33). The speech act that has historically been absent in the discourse of North America is a Native speech act—an Indian voice. It is a presence that is very likely to reveal itself as a story, in narrative form, rather than as a simple speech utterance.

As Coyote and the narrator discuss storytelling, or theorizing, they construct messages about an argument—a theoretical point of view. In this case part of their argument seems to be that one should read stories as theory and as aspects of social process,[9] rather than as literary play alone. The idea of stories as social process is closely connected with the conceptualization of language as part of material culture. The question of what constitutes history in the context of fictional narrative is closely linked to our ideas about what constitutes truth, reality, and story. As Julie Cruikshank notes, "The writing of history has always involved collecting, analyzing, and retelling stories about the past, yet the very act of collection means that

some stories are enshrined in books while others remain marginalized" (4). She goes on to observe that any kind of history is based on "a selective reading of the past, especially when they [stories] are retold to make meaningful connections in the present" (4). Literary history is, obviously, also a kind of history, and the narratives that this history preserves remain implicated in how stories are connected as both past and present in a contemporary Native reality. King's use of Western literature and theory to re-create a Native story is the kind of social process that bases itself on the experience, rather than the essence, of a Native worldview.

Bakhtin distinguishes the novel from the epic and the poem on the basis of its dialogism, its complexity. But the same sorts of complexity are clearly found in Native storytelling. In his argument that the novel is a vital and living tradition, Bakhtin's words closely resemble descriptions of a vital oral storytelling tradition. He says, "The novel has no canon of its own, as do other genres; only individual examples of the novel are historically active, not a generic canon as such. Studying other genres is analogous to studying dead languages; studying the novel, on the other hand, is like studying languages that are not only alive, but still young" (3). The ability of oral stories to change, to incorporate new experiences into older ones, implies the sort of vitality that Bakhtin writes about. The inclusion of newer, European elements into fresh versions of traditional stories ensures their vitality. When King uses traditional stories in the context of the novel form, the stories themselves are re-created and they simultaneously re-create the world—again and again. The stories continue to theorize, and thus to create, Native reality. Not to blend the new into the old would suggest stasis, the stories frozen through a (printed) moment in time. It would suggest stories as word museums rather than as vital and living, like language and culture themselves.

NOTES

1 From an unpublished tape transcription of tapes held by Wendy Wickwire (Tape NMM#5-Jan.28, 1982).

2 From an interview with Peter Gzowski on CBC radio, "Morningside," 5 April 1993, reprinted, this volume.

3 According to Wendy Wickwire, King was offered audio tapes of Robinson's stories, but he did not take them.

4 Note that Blackfoot is the plural used in Canada, while Native Americans from the same cultural group south of the border now use Blackfeet .

5 Thanks to Robin Ridington for pointing these out to me. The characters of the four women also turn up in slightly different forms and guises in other Native traditions.

6 Wendy Wickwire discusses the variations in Robinson's telling of stories by saying they "illustrate how Harry approached a story freshly each time he told it" (Introduction to *Nature Power* 18).

7 This separation of literal and figurative is, of course, characteristic of most structuralist literary criticism. For the differences between Frye's criticism and French structuralism, see Eagleton 94

8 In plains Indian culture, some people lived their lives backwards, as contraries (see Hirschfelder).

9 Cruikshank examines the role of traditional Yukon storytelling in the context of social process.

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