

“Trust Tonto”

Thomas King’s Subversive Fictions and the Politics of Cultural Literacy

When we think of multiculturalism in North America, the two main metaphors that come readily to mind are the melting pot and the mosaic. The former image, associated with the United States, suggests a mixture in which the constituent elements become indistinguishably blended—a kind of cultural puree—and has been generally discredited as a euphemism for assimilation. The latter image, usually associated with multiculturalism in Canada, suggests a composite of discrete pieces—more like a tossed salad—and is increasingly being viewed as dissatisfactory because, for one thing, it is premised on an illusory unity within and discontinuity between cultural communities. In literary criticism, as Smaro Kamboureli argues (3), the latter view of multiculturalism tends to reinforce the marginalization of minority or non-dominant cultures and voices, because it suggests that those cultures are homogeneous and leads to the tendency to view writers associated with minority cultures exclusively within the context of multiculturalism and/or as representatives of their communities.

Such formulations of multiculturalism have been radically revised in recent decades under the influence of a number of factors: greater consciousness of the diversity of those communities, growing resistance to the notion of cultural purity, and the increasing influence of postcolonial notions of hybridity and cross-fertilization. As a result, cultural production in Canada, as elsewhere, is increasingly being recognized as syncretic, as a heterogeneous complex in which different cultural elements are neither absolutely discrete nor absolutely blended. As Arnold Krupat argues in the

context of the United States, “[i]n a certain sense, indeed, the term multiculturalism is redundant if, as I have suggested, culture is best conceived in a manner analogous to Bakhtin’s conception of language as a socially plural construct in which our own speech is never entirely and exclusively our own, but always heteroglossic and polyvocal, formed always in relation to the speech of others” (237). However, because of the history of colonial relations between Canada’s settler cultures and the Aboriginal peoples they displaced, as well as the problematic representation and reception of multiculturalism historically, a view of the Canadian cultural landscape as syncretic requires a critical practice grounded in a historicized, pluralistic and nuanced cultural literacy. Developing such a literacy presents a number of challenges, and I aim in this essay—by focusing (as a non-Native and non-expert) on the work of (Native) writer Thomas King—not only to address some of these challenges, but also to illustrate the degree to which King’s fiction itself makes a substantial contribution to a decolonized cultural and literary critical practice.

“Trust Tonto” is the title of a regular feature of the Dead Dog Café Comedy Hour, a CBC radio show written by and featuring Thomas King, in which Tonto is, rather than trusty Indian sidekick, the authority on questions about Canadian culture, because he is from Six Nations, as opposed to the Lone Ranger, who is dismissed as “an American.” The title of the feature provides an apt phrase for approaching King’s fiction, as it suggests two important characteristics of his work: the reclamation of images of Native people from stereotyping by the dominant culture, and the reassertion and privileging of a Native perspective. Because of its emphasis on perspective and its implicit revisionism, the title also by extension raises interesting questions pertinent to debates about multiculturalism and the politics of interpretation, a discussion of which helps to contextualize King’s work as a whole.

In English-Canadian literature, as recent debates about multiculturalism, the academy, and critical practice have illustrated, the response on the part of the literary and academic establishment to the increasing cultural diversity of literary production has at times been a conflicted one; tokenism and the reinforcement of ethnic stereotypes, as Kamboureli points out (3), have often been the result of attempts to “include” other communities. Such dubious inclusion has certainly characterized the treatment of Native writers, in part a legacy of the institutional racism and ethnographic condescension that has marked non-Natives’ representation of native cultures

historically. "Anyone familiar with the history of Native literatures in the Americas," writes Kimberley Blaeser, "knows well the particulars—translation, re-interpretation, appropriation, romanticizing, museumization, consumerization, and marginalization. . . ." ("Critical Center" 54). Native stories have a long history of misrepresentation from within a Eurocentric ethnographic perspective as being incoherent and unsophisticated, and, given that such misunderstanding and misrepresentation have not evaporated with time, a lack of appreciation of the culturally specific contexts and subtexts of King's writing can certainly lead to similar treatment, which points to the significance of critical perspective and cultural context in the politics of literary multiculturalism.

In response to such appropriation and misrepresentation, Native writers and critics such as King, Jeannette Armstrong, Kimberley Blaeser and others have called for accurate and informed representation of writing by Native writers from within their cultural communities as an essential redress to its historical neglect or misrepresentation, because the dominant culture has monopolized representation of Native and other minorities and it is time to give minority voices more exposure. As Kateri Damm observes, "Who we are' has been constructed and defined by Others to the extent that at times we too no longer know who we are. The resulting confusion, uncertainty, low self-esteem and/or need to assert control over identity are just some of the damaging effects of colonization" (11). Yet, at present, because of institutional imbalances and wider social barriers, those voices are still fairly marginalized.

Balancing this need for accurate cultural contextualization, however, is the need to recognize "the complex, differing affiliations of individual writers" (Siemerling 18). While debates about representation and appropriation of non-dominant cultures by the dominant culture have raised awareness about cultural boundaries and the politics of cultural negotiation, recognizing the hybridity and syncretism of English-Canadian writing further complicates these debates, because such a recognition puts in question the cultural discontinuity upon which many positions in those debates are premised. Winfried Siemerling observes that the "presumable 'purity' of the identities of both dominant and ethnic cultures is construed, albeit relationally between communal self and other, through the ascription of exclusive qualities whose oppositional homogeneity can only be guaranteed by a maintenance of symbolical boundaries" (15). Both dominant and non-dominant cultures, therefore, are not only much more heterogeneous and much

less self-contained than many expressions of multiculturalism suggest, but they are also ultimately provisional, the result of rather than the source of social and cultural practice. As Smaro Kamboureli argues, “[l]abels are vexing and sneaky things because they are intended to express a stable and universal representation of both communities and individuals” (4).

To see any writer as representatively “Native” is thus both reductive and problematic. As King himself observes in an interview, “for Native people, identity comes from community, and it varies from community to community. I wouldn’t define myself as an Indian in the same way that someone living on a reserve would. That whole idea of ‘Indian’ becomes, in part, a construct. It’s fluid. We make it up as we go along” (Canton 98). In trying to provide a more nuanced account of the work of Native writers, then, not only does consciousness of different tribal traditions become important, but so does a recognition of those who write out of a more “pan-Indian” consciousness, those whose work cuts across different traditions, and those who go beyond, as King puts it, the “set of expectations that are used to mark out that which is Indian and that which is not” (“Introduction” 1990, xv).

King’s own work particularly illustrates the need for a more flexible understanding of the concept of “Native” and for a greater appreciation of cultural syncretism and intertextuality. Of Greek, German and Cherokee ancestry, King writes predominantly of Blackfoot characters in southern Alberta; in talking about Native writing, he gives primacy to “the firm base that we have in places” and adds, “[i]f I think of any place as home it’s the Alberta prairies, where I spent ten years with the Blackfoot people. I’m not Blackfoot, but that feels like the place I want to go back to” (Canton 99). His fiction is steeped in oral conventions and forms of storytelling, and he draws eclectically on a range of tribal traditions. At the same time, King’s writing is substantially grounded in the Western tradition of fiction, as evident in the accessibility of his comic realism to non-Native readers and also in the wide swath he cuts through the Western literary canon in *Green Grass, Running Water*. “By implying that there is a specific essence, say, to the writing of First Nations authors,” Kamboureli observes, “labels prematurely foreclose our understanding not only of the complexity inherent in individual communities but also of the various ways in which authors position themselves within their cultural groups and the Canadian society at large” (4). So not only is “Native” less than an exhaustive description of King as a writer, but those looking for a contained, homogeneous cultural commu-

nity for which King serves as a representative are going to have a hard time.

Postcolonial theories, furthermore, emphasize that non-dominant cultures have always been heterogeneous and synthetic rather than homogeneous, particularly because of the cultural impositions of colonialism; as Ella Shohat and Robert Stam note, “while hybridity has existed from time immemorial, as civilizations conflict, combine, and synthesize, it reached a kind of violent paroxysm with European colonization of the Americas” (43). Those theories also emphasize that dominant cultures—including the so-called dominant culture in Canada, as an extension of European cultures—have also always been heterogeneous and syncretic, not least because of the long history of non-European cultures’ influence on (and appropriation within) European cultural traditions. This does not mean, however, that “we are all one.” To recognize the relative nature of dominant and non-dominant or minority cultures and literatures, and the historical and contemporary intersections between them, is not to efface the difference between syncretism in a dominant culture and syncretism in minority cultures, nor to downplay the significance and complexity of critical mediation between the two. Cultural exchange and cross-fertilization have not exactly taken place on a level playing field, nor have they yet produced one. Thus, as Shohat and Stam argue, a “celebration of syncretism and hybridity *per se*, if not articulated with questions of historical hegemonies, risks sanctifying the *fait accompli* of colonial violence” (43).

Recognizing the way that cultural boundaries have been both constructed by and crossed within colonial discourse, however, does not necessarily make them easier to negotiate. Nonetheless, in response to the growing recognition of writing in Canada as fundamentally multicultural, providing an accurate representation of the diversity of that writing is becoming a central pedagogical imperative, and critics of all stripes *are* engaging in that cross-cultural and cross-racial reading. Given the historical and contemporary inequities of such cultural border-crossing, such a situation calls for a delicate critical balance. On the one hand, stressing a politics of agency and identification over a politics of identity has a certain amount of merit; Jeanne Perrault, for one, argues that an “academic retreat from the complexities of cross-cultural and cross-racial reading and writing can serve only those who wish to maintain the status quo” and that the “questions that engage us . . . are not, now, so much those of fixed identities, but rather closer to the question Adrienne Rich asks of herself, ‘*with whom do you*

believe your lot is cast?" (Bruchac and Perreault 10). On the other hand, past experiences of misrepresentation and/or insufficient appreciation of the quality of minority writers' work have understandably produced a great deal of reluctance about such reading on many fronts. Certainly, assuming artistic or critical freedom of passage—as in the case of, say, W.P. Kinsella—and/or responding to concerns about critical or artistic misrepresentation and appropriation of images of minorities by charging censorship is erroneous and, as Hartmut Lutz argues in the context of Native writing (5), historically and culturally naive.

In navigating this conflicted cultural territory, one obviously risks ultimately contributing to a recolonizing rather than decolonizing of Canadian culture and society. Thus, one requires both an awareness of cultural boundaries, however relative and constructed, and an awareness of cultural production as syncretic, crossing and in some cases displacing those boundaries. The delicacy of this critical negotiation is reflected in the challenges of approaching the work of Thomas King, which not only requires an awareness of these dynamics of cultural interaction but also inscribes such dynamics in innovative and instructive ways.

The need for careful qualification and for self-consciousness about one's assumptions is particularly evident in attempting to describe the heterogeneous formal qualities of King's writing. His work, from the comic realism of his first novel, *Medicine River*, to the challenging, eclectic *Green Grass, Running Water*, makes use of techniques of verisimilitude, reversals of fortune, mistaken assumptions, romantic entanglement, and so on, that are familiar to readers grounded in the Western comic tradition. Yet King also echoes stories from various Native traditions (Iroquois, Seneca, Cherokee, Blackfoot); he consistently draws on traditional forms of oral stories such as creation stories, cycle stories, and trickster tales; and he makes use of discursive conventions from oral storytelling, such as digression, repetition, a more informal and less elaborate syntax, and narratorial interaction with the audience. Finally, evident in his last two books is a parodic touch—an irreverent, subversive representation of dominant figures and narratives out of Western literature, religion and history—which has affinities with certain kinds of postcolonial texts which rewrite the canonical texts of the colonial centre, though King himself has expressed discomfort with the term "post-colonial" because it posits colonialism as the

defining term and also suggests a literature evoking a continuing trauma (“Godzilla” 11).

Given these various elements, it might be tempting initially to describe his work as blending Western literary forms with forms from Native cultures. A more appropriate characterization, however, can be found in Kimberley Blaeser’s description of the trickster figure in Native writing as “[n]ot a composite, which is made up of distinct and recognizable parts, but a complex, which is one unit whose makeup is intricate and interwoven” (“Trickster” 51). Her description applies nicely to King’s writing, since in those Native cultures (and King’s writing as an extension of them), that blending or syncretism is already there, because of the cross-fertilization historically and currently between different tribal traditions and because of the legacy of the history of colonialism, during which cultural interaction was imposed. Consequently, as Shohat and Stam emphasize, cultural syncretism is varied and—as a result of the generally conflictual cultural relations within colonialism—often uneven, reflecting hegemonic relations and cultural tensions (43). Such tensions are manifested in the consistent and humorous subversiveness of King’s work, including its formal qualities, as he draws on conventions consistent with those of mainstream Western fiction, but, as an overview of his work serves to illustrate, has progressively resisted its teleology, causality, and ontological cohesion.

Medicine River is easily the most accessible of King’s three books of fiction, and yet elements of it depart from the linear structure and verisimilitude of Western bourgeois comic realism. In “Godzilla vs. Post-colonial,” King underlines a number of features of contemporary Native writing in describing what he calls “associational literature,” the definition of which in many ways applies to *Medicine River*. This kind of writing organizes

the elements of plot along a rather flat narrative line that ignores the ubiquitous climaxes and resolutions that are so valued in non-Native literature. In addition to this flat narrative line, associational literature leans towards the group rather than the single, isolated character, creating a fiction that de-values heroes and villains in favour of the members of a community, a fiction which eschews judgments and conclusions. (14)

The structure of *Medicine River*, which focuses on the return of photographer Will Horse Capture from Toronto to the town of Medicine River in southern Alberta and his gradual immersion in the community, avoids the bourgeois individualism associated with the novel in the Western tradition

by consistently breaking up the focus on Will as protagonist; most of the chapters in the novel juxtapose episodes from Will's childhood or his life in Toronto with vignettes which focus on characters from the town or the nearby reserve. The juxtaposed pieces are obviously, though in some cases obliquely, associated; in one chapter, for instance, a portrait of a white neighbor from Will's childhood trying to hide the marks of her husband's physical abuse is intercut with the story of Will's cousin January Pretty Weasel, who forges a suicide note for her abusive husband after his suspicious death from a gunshot wound. This juxtapositioning of vignettes helps to disperse the emphasis from Will to the community and his relationship to it, and to give the narrative a composite rather than linear structure.

The other significant element of *Medicine River* that breaks up what is otherwise fairly conventional comic realism is the presence of the tricksterish Harlen Bigbear. Though Harlen is a realistic character, he also reflects the typical ambivalence of the trickster; as Will says, "Harlen Bigbear was my friend, and being Harlen's friend was hard" (11). Harlen is at once a force of chaos, meddling in Will's life and complicating the life of the community in general, is gossipy, verbally slippery and contradictory; but he is also a force for healing, attempting to smooth over disagreements, to ease the pain of others, and to encourage respect for tradition. "He took on a lot of weight," Will notes, "and the one thing he enjoyed more than helping someone out with their burden was sharing it with others" (2). Harlen is the source of much of the novel's comic flair and verbal dexterity, and can also largely take the credit for Will's finding a sense of community, place and family—one of the key themes of the novel. Thus King's evoking of the figure of the trickster further distinguishes the novel from the Western tradition (in that the trickster is a central fixture of Native cultures) and reflects the pluralism of its cultural influences and characteristics.

King's 1993 collection *One Good Story, That One*, like *Green Grass, Running Water*, is formally much more heterogeneous than *Medicine River*, and in various ways departs from its comic realism, making use of oral storytelling conventions and/or disrupting the sense of a consistent, contained, empirical reality that *Medicine River* retains. The stories in the collection are engagingly diverse and, while most of them are in some way concerned with negotiating cultural borders, they make use of differing strategies for doing so.

Some of the stories, such as "Trap Lines" and the hilarious *tour de force*, "Borders," are similar in tone and form to *Medicine River*, first-person,

comic realist vignettes about Native characters. In some cases, however, similarly realistic situations are disrupted, at least for the white characters, by some extraordinary occurrence involving Indians. In "Totem," for instance, in an art gallery featuring "contemporary Canadian art from the Atlantic provinces" (13), totem poles begin to grow and to disturb the curators with their singing. In "How Corporal Colin Sterling Saved Blossom, Alberta, and Most of the Rest of the World as Well," science fiction meets trickster discourse (to use Gerald Vizenor's term) as blue coyotes descend in spaceships and make off with Indians all over the world; the action centers on Blossom, Alberta, where RCMP officer Corporal Colin Sterling "saves" everybody else but is unable to prevent the "kidnapping"—though one of the Indians is heard singing "What took you so long?" (63), this is how Sterling sees it.

Other stories, such as "Magpies," a story about Granny's desire to be buried in a tree in traditional fashion rather than die in hospital, employ a more oral discursive voice and evoke an oral storytelling situation: "This one is about Granny. Reserve story. Everyone knows this story. Wilma knows it. Ambrose knows it. My friend, Napioa. Lionel James. Billy Frank knows it, too. Billy Frank hears this story in Calgary. He hears it three times. Maybe six. Boy, he tells me, here comes that story again" (21). A similar narrative voice characterizes the title story, in which a storyteller entertains a group of anthropologists who have come to the reserve to tape traditional stories; what he tells them instead is a parodic version of the story of Adam and Eve: "But that one says that Evening and Ah-damn better leave that good place, garden, Evening's garden, go somewhere else. Just like Indian today" (9). In a couple of stories, King also makes use of the bumbling trickster Coyote, whose zealous attempts to fix the world usually result in catastrophe, to subversively rewrite North American history from a Native perspective; in "A Coyote Columbus Story," for instance, Old Coyote precipitates the arrival of Columbus, who, discovering no saleable goods, steals Old Coyote's Indian friends and sells them in Spain. Thus *One Good Story, That One* represents a diversification in King's formal strategies that not only provides an engaging variety but also a series of alternative representations of cultural interaction.

Coyote also figures prominently in *Green Grass, Running Water*, which combines the range of forms described so far in a complex and ambitious narrative that constitutes one of the most sustained and hilarious assaults on the Eurocentrism of North American society in contemporary fiction. In

the book's prologue—preamble might be a better word—King evokes both creation stories from Native traditions and the book of Genesis, but within a clearly oral discursive framework that is crucial to appreciating the form and subversive intent of the rest of the novel:

So.

In the beginning, there was nothing. Just the water.
Coyote was there, but Coyote was asleep. That Coyote was asleep and that
Coyote was dreaming. When that Coyote dreams, anything can happen.
I can tell you that. (1)

King describes his version of Coyote in the novel as “a sacred clown”:
“Someone who could point out the fallacies in situations and arguments
and who made sure that nothing stayed done, whatever you tried to do, that
particular figure would take apart. My Coyote wants to see the world in a
slight state of turmoil” (Canton 100). In true Coyote form, Coyote's dream,
by virtue of a series of puns, turns into a demanding, megalomaniacal Old
Testament God—a Eurocentric intrusion that is repeated in various ways
throughout the text:

I am god, says that Dog Dream.
“Isn't that cute,” says Coyote. “That Dog Dream is a contrary. That Dog Dream
has everything backward.”
But why am I a little god? shouts that god.
“Not so loud,” says Coyote. “You're hurting my ears.”
I don't want to be a little god, says that god. I want to be a big god! (2)

Each of the four books that follow attempts to explain the presence of the water through a creation story, which then goes wrong—courtesy of Coyote's interference. In these stories, creation figures from various tribal traditions such as First Woman, Old Woman, and Changing Woman encounter figures from Western culture such as God, Noah, and Fenimore Cooper's hero Nasty Bumpo. The latter all attempt to appropriate these women within the terms of a Eurocentric Christian patriarchy; for instance, A.A. Gabriel, Heavenly Host, interrupts a creation narrative involving Thought Woman to try to convince her to play the role of the Virgin Mary (270), and Young Man Walking On Water (namely, Christ) invokes Christian rules when Old Woman upstages him by calming the waves that are rocking a boat full of his disciples:

Hooray, says those men. We are saved.
Hooray, says Young Man Walking On Water. I have saved you.

Actually, says those men, that other person saved us.

Nonsense, says Young Man Walking On Water. That other person is a woman.

That other person sings songs to waves. (351)

To elude being apprehended/appropriated, the women take on the names of canonical figures—Lone Ranger, Robinson Crusoe, Hawkeye, and Ishmael—paired with indigenous, colonized sidekicks, “Native accomplices who symbolize the ‘noble savage’” (Horne 266). In this allegorical fashion, as Dee Horne notes, “King critiques appropriation and the settler culture’s emphasis on individualism through the four Indian tricksters who appropriate the names of settlers who, in turn, have appropriated ‘Indians’” (265).

The book’s intertextual play eclectically crosses ontological, generic and cultural boundaries, but in a way that underlines the oppressive Eurocentrism of those boundaries and asserts the primacy of a native perspective. Myth, reality, the sacred, and the absurd are generally recognized in Western thought as different and distinct orders of being, but in this book, as in much native orature and literature, they are constantly merged in playful, creative, and purposeful ways. Furthermore, the sendup of such canonical figures clearly has affiliations with such postcolonial texts as Derek Walcott’s *Pantomime*, Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and Timothy Findley’s *Not Wanted on the Voyage*, which rewrite key texts of the colonial centre and undermine the assumptions they inscribe. Such subversion thus is an important part of the way the book illuminates, as Laura Donaldson argues, “not only how reading and interpretation constitute a crucial component of the relation between culture and empire, but also of Indian resistance to this nexus” (40).

These narratives provide, in a way, an allegorical genealogy of the four Indians (Lone Ranger *et al.*), who are present (ostensibly as escapees from the psychiatric ward of a hospital in the U.S.) in the relatively realistic sequences that comprise most of each book of *Green Grass, Running Water*. In these sequences, set in and around Blossom, Alberta, the four Indians, intent on fixing the world, intervene in the lives of an ensemble cast of Blackfoot characters. Starting small, they focus their reform attempts on the hapless Lionel Red Dog, a television salesman turning forty, whose career options have been limited through his “mistakes”—somewhat comic misunderstandings which have been compounded by the racism of mainstream society. Also in need of “fixing” is Lionel’s hot-and-cold relationship with Alberta Frank, a Native studies professor who wants a baby without a man,

and as a result is constantly playing Lionel off against another potential prospect: Charlie Looking Bear, a yuppie lawyer working for a company constructing a nearby dam. The intervention of the four Indians on Lionel's behalf and the catastrophic meddling of Coyote, while seeming to transgress codes of literary realism, are an affirmation of the belief in most Native cultures "that sacred beings inhabit the same space as humans and that frequent interchanges with them form a necessary part of both individual and tribal experience" (Donaldson 31-32).

King's subversive treatment of the conventions and icons of Western fiction is not restricted to his use of oral conventions, reworked creation stories, and counter-colonial parody in the allegorical sequences. In the more realistic sequences, he also hilariously disrupts causality and plausibility, particularly but not exclusively through the involvement of Coyote and the four Indians. For instance, he playfully foregrounds the use of narrative suture by continually starting one sequence off on exactly the same note with which the previous sequence ended, and at one point he has all the characters tuned into the same Western (in various media), with Charlie's father Portland—a Hollywood Indian who goes by the name Iron Eyes Screaching Eagle and is forced to wear a rubber nose to make himself look more Indian—as the mysterious warrior of the story's title. The story, however, has been "fixed" by the four Indians so that, this time, the Indians and not the cowboys win; the cavalry vanishes into thin air, and the heroes stare in perplexity at the seemingly invincible Indians bearing down on them: "John Wayne looked at his gun. Richard Widmark was pulling the trigger on empty chambers. The front of his fancy pants was dark and wet" (321).

The most obvious and ingenious bit of orchestration in the novel is the destruction of the dam, which is built on a fault line on Indian territory and (with a nod both to *Moby Dick* and, presumably, to the Grand Coulee Dam on the Columbia River) is named the Grand Baleen. The work on the dam has been halted by injunctions from Lionel's uncle Eli, a retired University of Toronto literature professor who has completed a return to his heritage somewhat reminiscent of that of Will in *Medicine River* and whose family cabin stands in the dam's spillway. At the end of the book, King contrives to have several characters' cars—a Nissan, a Pinto and a Kharmann-Ghia—sail into the dam as a (Coyote-precipitated) earthquake strikes; Eli is killed in the aftermath, but the destruction of the cabin provides the opportunity for Lionel to assert his commitment to his family, and by extension to his

people, when he expresses a wish to rebuild it and live in it (though this gesture, in typical fashion, King undercuts by having Lionel's aunt Norma insist on being first). The bursting of the dam is obviously a subversive send-up of the arrival of Columbus, but it also echoes traditional oral stories in which Coyote breaks a dam to provide water for others or to free passage for the salmon; thus Coyote's ambivalent position as a source of both catastrophe and deliverance is emphasized by the divergent consequences of the dam's destruction, particularly for Eli and Lionel.

Thus, in a reversal of condescending ethnological treatment of Native cultures and the subordinating inscription of Native people within a Eurocentric world view, King's versions of European religious, cultural, literary and historical narratives are contained and subverted within an oral and circular framework, rather than a linear and teleological framework, emphasizing a native perspective. Margaret Atwood says of "One Good Story, That One" that "we are forced to experience first hand how it must feel to have your own religious stories retold, in a version that neither 'understands' nor particularly reverences them" (250), a subversion which is a fundamental structural principle in *Green Grass, Running Water*. Trickster stories, Kimberley Blaeser notes, "frequently work to enlighten the audience to their own flaws or to caution against certain actions by exposing the ludicrousness of Trickster's actions" ("Trickster" 55), thus venting social tensions and often challenging the status quo, functions that *Green Grass, Running Water*, eclectic a trickster story as it is, certainly fulfills. This manifestation of syncretism and subversive cultural negotiation through formal innovations is characteristic of King's work as a whole, but in *Green Grass, Running Water* it reaches an almost carnivalesque culmination.

Blaeser's comments about the reformist and satirical dimensions of trickster discourse raise questions about the "audience" of King's fiction—the kinds of readers to whom his texts speak—and considering the question of King's audience necessarily involves further considerations of multiculturalism and decolonization. To some degree, King's work is directed at a particular readership; he has noted that *Medicine River* was written principally for Native readers (Rooke 72) and has voiced an understandable skepticism about whites' appreciation of his work (Weaver 57)—understandable especially since universalizing arguments about a work's significance or appeal have all too often been colonizing. On the other

hand, he also has commented that *Green Grass, Running Water* is, more than his previous work, directed at non-Native readers, reflecting the need to engage those readers in a mutual decolonization. To that degree, I would argue, while King's work may speak primarily to Native readers, it's certainly worth it (as *Green Grass, Running Water* in particular makes clear) for others to listen.

Especially important for Native *and* non-Native readers, for instance, is King's representation of Native people, which might be described as a decolonization that deemphasizes colonialism. King's work quite clearly reflects a consciousness of and a resistance to a long history of Eurocentric misrepresentation, but King prefers to respond, as he makes clear in interviews and essays, primarily by normalizing such representations and by concentrating on the relationship between individual characters and their communities. While *Green Grass Running Water* and the stories in *One Good Story, That One* do foreground the struggles and hardships of being Native in a racist society, they do so in a way that resists depicting Native people as victims and resists defining them exclusively in relation to the dominant culture or according to its expectations. At the same time, his work inscribes a consciousness of the way in which "Indigenous peoples in literature," as Terry Goldie argues, "are not a reflection of themselves but of the needs of the white culture which created that literature" (78). If "the Indigene is a semiotic pawn on a chessboard under the control of the white signmaker" (Goldie 70), King moves to break that control and actively engages, especially in the allegorical sequences of *Green Grass, Running Water*, in rewriting the rules of the game.

King's portrayal of Native characters consistently subverts the stereotypical or fetishized versions that are common currency among non-Natives. He recurrently lampoons the retention of archaic images as expressive of Native identity, such as when he has Lionel James, an elder, lament in *Medicine River* that non-Native audiences are not interested in contemporary stories about natives and only "want to hear stories about how Indians used to be" (173), and when he has Clifford Sifton, the builder of the dam, complain to Eli in *Green Grass, Running Water*, ". . . you guys aren't real Indians anyway. I mean, you drive cars, watch television, go to hockey games" (141). This stereotype, of course, has its roots in a romanticizing of Native people which is as old as writing by Europeans in Canada, and it has the effect of discrediting and disenfranchising those who fail to fit the bill.

King also frequently exposes the stereotypical association of Native people with violence, poverty, and alcoholism, the product of a similar sort of circular thinking. In the story "A Seat in the Garden," for instance, the white main character assumes that the three old Indians picking up bottles from his yard are alcoholics supporting their habit, though they are actually drinking lemon water and cleaning up his litter. Likewise, King has Alberta retort to a desk clerk who apologizes for doubting that she is a university professor, "I could have been a corporate executive" (*Green Grass* 174). An important part of *Medicine River*, as Percy Walton observes, is the way in which King cultivates expectations on the part of Will and the reader based on stereotypical images of the Indigene and then deftly undercuts or qualifies them (81). This strategy is important in *Green Grass*, *Running Water* as well, as a sequence of vignettes featuring Alberta's father Amos illustrates. Amos is first introduced as a pathetic, drunken man verbally abusing Alberta's mother, but this impression is modified in subsequent scenes in which we see Amos as a tribal cop quietly avenging a friend who has been swindled by a white used car salesman, and seething with anger when sacred dance outfits are confiscated by border police who subsequently return them (only after political pressure is exerted) desecrated and ruined. The effect is to contextualize and historicize the reader's initial impression of Amos, deflecting attention from his state to the causes of it: the debilitating effects of racism.

Through such undercutting of stereotypes, King turns the tables by showing that it's whites, not Native people, who have some problems, and by portraying Native people as patient (though not quiescent nor romantically stoic) survivors of the obstacles the dominant culture has put in their way. Native people, Kateri Damm emphasizes, have not been unaffected by the dominant culture but nonetheless have endured—"we have not faded into the earth like snow before the summer sun of 'progress' nor have we stagnated in some sort of retrograde time capsule" (16)—and King's subtle subversiveness underlines and indeed epitomizes this spirit of endurance.

Another aspect of the decolonizing of attitudes at work in King's fiction is his representation of whites, a turning of the tables obviously to be relished by a Native readership, but also an important opportunity for readers from the dominant culture to look in the mirror of stereotypical caricature. King's white characters generally display a blithe and sometimes malevolent ignorance, insensitivity, and sense of superiority towards Native people and

Native cultural practices, and the attitudes of whites towards Native people range from patronizing sympathy to antagonism and exploitation. For instance, the estranged husband of Lionel's sister Latisha, the airheaded American George Morningstar, is initially a charming good-for-nothing who engages in playful banter with Latisha about the superiority of the United States: "Put fifty Canadians in a room with one American, and the American will be in charge in no time" (132). Later, however, he becomes physically abusive and precipitates a small crisis at the end of *Green Grass, Running Water*, when he violates the sanctity of a Sun Dance by secretly attempting to photograph the ceremony. In the story "Borders," a woman and her son on their way to Salt Lake City end up stranded between Canadian and American customs when she insists on proclaiming Blackfoot as her nationality—a literalization of liminality which nonetheless foregrounds that, as King notes elsewhere, "within the collective mind of contemporary tribes such as the Iroquois confederacy in the east and the Blackfoot confederacy in the west, the forty-ninth parallel is a figment of someone else's imagination" ("Introduction" 1987, 10). As individuals and as representatives of institutions, whites are generally presented as a disruptive presence in King's fiction, underlining the obstacles that their assumptions of superiority and their stereotyping of Native people present for King's protagonists (one notable exception to this rule being the title character of the richly comic "Joe the Painter and the Deer Island Massacre" in *One Good Story*).

King also at times presents whites as cartoonish colonial stereotypes, particularly through his use of character names, which are often playful allegorical and intertextual ciphers. In "A Seat in the Garden," for instance, the main character, Joe Hovaugh (Jehovah when you say it fast), gets annoyed by the appearance of a ghostly Indian in his garden—a playful sendup of the Eurocentrism of the Christian myth of Eden (with echoes of the movie *Field of Dreams* as well). In *Green Grass, Running Water*, such play on names is extensive. Hovaugh reappears as the director of the hospital who pursues the four Indians into Canada. Two security guards who escort Lionel from a Salt Lake City hotel—to which he returns after being mistakenly jailed as an AIM supporter—are named Tom and Gerry, and the police who take him to the station are Chip and Dale (all literally cartoon characters). A busload of Canadian tourists descending on the Dead Dog Café, where Latisha works as a waitress, bear the names of famous figures from Canadian litera-

ture who, as King observes, “blur the line between reality and fiction and between what we think of as history and just gossip—between Indian and non-Indian” (Canton 100): J. Richardson, A. Belaney, Polly Johnson, Sue Moodie; incidentally, Latisha guesses that they are Canadian and not American by the way “they filed off the bus in an orderly line and stood in front of the restaurant and waited until they were all together” (155). Clifford Sifton, who tries to convince Eli to clear out of his cabin and to give up his resistance to the dam, is named after Wilfred Laurier’s notorious Minister of the Interior, who presided over settlement of the west; in a similar spirit, the name of Lionel’s patronizing boss, Bill Bursum, is a clever reversal of an early twentieth-century American bill designed to free up Pueblo land for squatters. Finally, in a particularly cutting allusion, Lionel’s boss during a short-lived stint at the Department of Indian Affairs, in whose place Lionel is to give a talk on “The History of Cultural Pluralism in Canada’s Boarding Schools,” is named Duncan Scott, a replaying of the bureaucratic, assimilationist paternalism of poet and Indian Affairs administrator Duncan Campbell Scott; needless to say, after Lionel is mistakenly arrested, Duncan doesn’t return his calls. Along with King’s normalizing of representations of Native people, such satiric and intertextual representations of whites, and indeed King’s characterization of whites in general, function as a kind of counter-discourse to traditional white imaginings of the Indigene, depictions of Native people as one-dimensional, stylized caricatures. If anybody’s “wooden” here, it’s not the Indians.

Such intertextual allusiveness and strategic satire highlight the way in which King’s work must be approached and appreciated in the context of issues germane to Native peoples and cultures historically and currently. Yet we also have to recognize in King’s writing a highly unique and varied (rather than representative) style that reflects a wide range of influences and forms, and that his writing speaks to non-Native readers as well as Native readers. Thus King’s work serves as an example of how we have to balance our appreciation of cultural difference and concerns about appropriation and misrepresentation with a respect for the individuality of the writer (aside from that writer’s connection to a specific community). In recognizing that non-Native readers stand to benefit from King’s decolonizing fictions, however, it is important not to stress Native people’s relations with the dominant culture nor to privilege a non-Native audience, which

would essentially be a kind of recolonizing, a continuing fixation on the centre which has been a significant focus of debate in postcolonial writing and criticism. Furthermore, one has to be conscious of the uneasy relation between Native literatures and critical theorizing, and of the potential for colonization when “authority emanat[es] from the mainstream critical center to the marginalized native texts” (Blaeser “Critical Center,” 56). These larger issues of cultural literacy and critical politics, indeed, are brought home through the challenges of approaching King’s work as a non-Native reader and developing a greater appreciation for it. While I happen to think King’s work is extremely rich, enjoyable and significant, my appreciation of it is obviously limited, and in such cross-cultural reading an awareness of one’s limitations is crucial. Thus, as much as it is tempting to assert the importance of King’s voice to an increasingly culturally diverse Canadian literary scene, that assertion raises the larger issue of the uneasy place of Native writers in “Canadian” culture, as well as the danger of erasing more specific and more significant cultural and communal ties.

Present theories of multiculturalism, syncretism and hybridity may have taken us beyond the notion of homogeneous cultural enclaves of which individual writers are unproblematically representative—though such theories should be differentiated from arguments against ethnic ghettoizing which are intended as strategies to contain and erase cultural pluralism. However, appropriation, misrepresentation, and cultural hegemony are still live issues which complicate a representation of the multiculturalism of cultural production in Canada. Thus a necessary strategy in decolonizing Canadian culture is the development of a more pluralistic, historicized cultural literacy, and, furthermore—to ensure that that cross-cultural reading doesn’t slide into recolonization—the development of a consciousness of the syncretism of Canadian writing. This involves recognizing in Canadian writing not a comfortable fusion of cultural influences, but a complex and hierarchized set of cultural interactions, negotiations, appropriations and subversions at a textual level that are a reflection of larger dynamics within Canadian society. What makes the work of Thomas King so significant to a literary scene in which these dynamics are increasingly evident is that his writing not only dramatizes the importance of being conscious of such syncretism but also illustrates its creative potential.

So, ultimately—to come back to the metaphors of food with which this discussion began (and which are staples of celebrations of multiculturalism)—

we're not talking about a cultural puree, and we're not talking about a tossed salad. Where does that leave us? In *Green Grass, Running Water*, Lionel's culinarily innovative mother makes Tortino de Carciofi with Ribollita (vegetable soup and an artichoke omelet) and substitutes elk for the artichokes, and in making Hawaiian Curdle Surprise substitutes moose meat for the usual main ingredient, octopus. Maybe there's a metaphor in that.

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