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"One Tricky Coyote": The Fiction of Thomas King

By

Giselle Rene Lavalley

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ABSTRACT

This thesis evaluates the literary achievement of Thomas King from an individual Aboriginal perspective by examining specifically his novels, Medicine River and Green Grass, Running Water, with reference to his short stories. It argues that textual readings which merely impose the Western literary tradition upon Aboriginal texts invariably limit their scope of interpretation and understanding. The study of Aboriginal literature necessitates a holistic approach that involves historical, political, and cultural contextualizations.

I note briefly the cultural differences between my own response and non-Aboriginal responses, the latter mostly in the form of reviews, and proceed to analyze issues present in King's texts which I considered culturally relevant. The three topics that materialized prominently in and unify King's fiction are: identity politics, cultural resiliency, and the Aboriginal oral tradition. My consideration of Medicine River includes an exploration of the intersubjectivity of truth and story-telling, whereas that of Green Grass, Running Water entails an examination of: technology's negative impact upon the natural world as well as on the First Nations and their cultures; Western literature and visual media as colonizing agents; and the ways in which Aboriginal re-visions of celebrated texts and stories of the Western literary canon foreground marginalized knowledges. Other related issues include: the image of the "Indian"; King's treatment of Western myths and stereotypes of Aboriginals, and the Aboriginal responses to them; the fictional non-Aboriginal responses and

attitudes towards Aboriginal beliefs and customs; the significance of the land to First Nations' cultures; and the politics of land claims. By locating King's novels in historical, political, and cultural sites, this thesis underscores the importance of recognizing race and ethnicity in analyses of Aboriginal texts.

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who has guided me this far.

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Nai:weh.
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Introduction

Thomas King has emerged as one of the most prominent Aboriginal writers in North America in the last ten years. In 1992 and 1993, two of his recent works, A Coyote Columbus Story and Green Grass, Running Water, were shortlisted for the Governor-General's Awards. Though American-born, King is a Canadian citizen and considers himself a Canadian writer because his fiction is set in Canada. In light of his importance to Aboriginal literature in Canada, I chose to write a thesis that evaluates the literary achievement of Thomas King, first, by noting briefly the cultural differences in my own response and non-Aboriginal responses, and second, by closely analyzing issues presented within King's texts that were culturally relevant. As an Aboriginal reader, for me, the subjects of identity politics, cultural tenacity and continuity, and the Aboriginal oral tradition seem to emerge from and unify King's fiction. Other related topics include: the image of the "Indian"; King's treatment of Western myths and stereotypes of Aboriginals, and the Aboriginal responses to them; the Aboriginal perspective of history in Canada; the interaction between Aboriginal and Eurocentric cultures; the fictional non-Aboriginal responses and attitudes towards Aboriginal cultures, beliefs, customs; the significance of the land and Nature to First Nations' cultures; and the politics surrounding land claims. These issues present themselves in varying degrees in the novels and in the critical responses.

Initially, I had planned to examine all of King's works, but soon discovered that the critical texts were too brief since he merely wrote the introductions for the anthologies. Of his fiction, I also limited my investigations to his novels because they incorporated several of the ideas presented in his short stories. The section on Green Grass, Running Water is much larger than that on Medicine River because it is a longer and more complex work in terms of subversive strategies, in that King manipulates literary devices, such as narrative form and voice(s), to historicize, politicize, and re-vise widely-accepted versions of North American and human histories.

My methodology involved formulating my own responses to the works before I examined the other critical responses. After having read the non-Aboriginal criticisms, I analyzed them in relation to the texts themselves and then juxtaposed them briefly with my own textual responses. As part of this analysis, I explored the issue of racial and cultural difference as being more than mere diversity or variation; in fact, this difference embodies conflict that is historically specific and part of larger political processes and systems. Aboriginal resistance lies in self-conscious engagement with hegemonic discourses on and representations of the Aboriginal in literature, and entails the creation of oppositional analytic and cultural spaces within the arena of literary criticism.

Most of the secondary materials available to me were reviews, followed in quantity by interviews. Upon having read the scant articles, a comment King had made in the introduction to The Native in Literature, a collection of essays written

primarily by non-Aboriginals, came to mind: "These essays then are explorations, and exploration is seldom an orderly affair. There is always the chance of taking a wrong turn or getting lost--or falling off the edge. So it is with exploration" (13-14). I don't question the validity and adequacy of my resources as interpretations of literary works. My concern lies with their function as interpretations of Aboriginal literary works; in terms of revealing their authors' cultural consciousness, they spanned from insightful to surprisingly ignorant. Evaluations that ignore or omit the significant modifier, "Aboriginal", from "Aboriginal literature" risk overlooking the wealth of cultural information and demarcations in which the text may be grounded, and may, in fact, inadvertently overemphasize other elements to compensate.

Perhaps the deficiency in some cases arose from lack of printed space; subsequently, many reviewers tried to juggle too many components of the text, or had to ignore a few to save a couple of lines. I, too, had to select a few topics and focus solely on them. (I could have written my thesis on Green Grass, Running Water alone.) I converged on the aforementioned subject matters because 1) they struck me as significant in both the texts and in real life, and 2) I could suggest possible explanations or replies to some of the critics' uncertainties or questions. By actively politicizing and historicizing Thomas King's novels, I hope to contribute to the discouraging of the e-rasing/racing of race and ethnicity from future analyses of Aboriginal literature.

Identity Politics and the Provisionality of Truth in Medicine River

> You know...they got people who get paid for figuring out ways of breaking things down into little pieces....Categories, that's what they call them.
>
> - Harlen Bigbear, Medicine River[1]

Critical responses to Medicine River are intriguing in that they locate the novel's art in single literary aspects, each focusing on only one issue. Reviewers have been divided into two camps, isolating either the perennial theme of the absent father or of the homecoming as the key to the protagonist, Will. "The absence of his father, it becomes clear, is the great condition of Will's life, and it has made him profoundly detached and passive," pronounces Jack Butler;[2] "The separation from his father is Will's central concern. Though from a culture that takes names and the act of naming seriously, he never tells us his father's last name," observes Jim Bencivenga.[3] He also expounds: "Home, and having to go there, is the central fact of this delightful, bittersweet first novel," and

> When a white woman he loves tells him she is married, it is her promiscuous idea of what extended family means, not Will's, that is called into question. Will demands that she decide between him and her husband. She chooses neither, walking away from any commitment. This jars awake memories Will has long suppressed and leads directly to his return to Medicine River. (19)

The immediate shortfall of these reviews is that they reductively filter the novel through a Western literary tradition to detect and reveal themes familiar to the dominant Anglo-Saxon culture. The fact that Butler even begins his review with a Robert Frost quotation, "'Home is where when you have to go there, they have to take you in'," underscores his approbation of the supposed universality of the subjects of home(lands) and absent fathers. In addition, David Giddens implies that the novel

is deserving of our attention because of the conventional literary devices found therein: "[Medicine River is] full of the stuff that makes English literature professors beam: irony, parallelisms, echoes, and more pathetic fallacy than you can shake a stick at."[4] Consequently, the simplistic imbibing of King's text into the traditional Western literary matrix neglects to address the social-political specificities of the novel's Aboriginal topography, such as the locale of a character's upbringing (reserve or city), Aboriginal blood quanta, and the effect of Status and non-Status designations.

Conversely, some reviews typecast Will as representative of The Modern Blackfoot, or the novel's Blackfoot community as representative of the entire Aboriginal race. Butler asserts, "[Will] is formed as *an image for the state of all the Blackfeet*. Native North American but disconnected from their heritage, citizens but not at home in the ambitions of the world, they drift with their fates," (italics mine); Candace Smith remarks, "There's humor, gentleness, and insight without sentimentality in Will's search for roots and identity among a people anchored in tradition;"[5] Bert Almon comments, "The flashbacks aren't as interesting as the scenes in the present, situations that reveal the attitudes and problems of contemporary Native societies;"[6] and the review in Publishers Weekly concludes, "King's deceptively simple comedy is an intriguing *portrait of Native American life today*" (italics mine).[7]

These observations indicate cognizance of the text's politicized rendition of its characters, but fail to acknowledge the differences between Aboriginals of sundry nationalities, let alone those amongst members of the same nation. Such sweeping (and implicitly negative) assessments of one representing all, even within the same

ethnic group, opens the opportunity for stereotypes to flourish. The keywords "image" and "portrait" suggest that formulae are already ensconced in the critics' receptions of the novel.

Generally, the major flaw in both critical approaches is that, by sequestering the significance of a single Aboriginal or First Nation, they create centres, or at the very least, demarcations for exclusion.[8] The sole exception was a review by an Aboriginal woman, in which, rather than converge on Will, she underscored the novel's inclinations towards collectivization: "The book Medicine River, by Thomas King, is about Native Indian people being removed from their culture by outside social agents and groups; but they will eventually return."[9] In addition to referring to "people" instead of employing the dehumanizing phrases, "Native societies" and "Native American life", Marybeth Westman historicizes and politicizes the novel. She insightfully outlines historical assimilationist strategies enacted by the Canadian government against First Nations peoples, as well as the attempt to define--to restrict, in fact, through enfranchisement--who is legally an "Indian." Furthermore, she delineates briefly the effects of these imperialist tactics on the Aboriginal sense of identity, as well as the measures conducive to reintegration into Aboriginal cultures, and then applies her observations to the novel. This holistic method of textual interpretation, the examining of intersecting social and political factors, also applies naturally to the issues of identity politics and the provisional construction of truth. King rejects the concept of a singular, independent/self-contained identity in favour of one that advocates one's identity as a collective venture, manipulated by social

circumstances (including one's culture[s]) and by other people. The novel similarly posits that truth is formulated from several diverse perspectives, all of which serve to surround truth but are unable to fix it. I intend to establish that the novel intertwines these two concepts, incorporating the latter in order to illuminate its substantial consideration of the construction of one's identity/ies, as enacted primarily through Will.

In contrast to the aforementioned critics' isolating of the notions of place and single identity sources, the novel consistently destabilizes such dismantlings with its manipulation of the concept of an objective, fixed truth. It opens with a letter from Will's father to his mother, and, in fact, the entire first chapter subverts the presumed authority assigned to the written word. It consolidates Will's narrative, the letters, childhood memories, photographs, and television, thus promptly introducing alternative discourses to the first person narration and calling into question the notion of authenticity. Will scorns his father as having been "a jerk"(9), and the letters would seem at least to indicate that his father had been unreliable and a deadbeat dad. Yet, the fact that Will's mother saved the letters unsettles Will's denunciation because their existence implies that Will's image of his father is not entirely accurate, but rather, incomplete. Harlen suggests to Will, "Your mother must have loved him" (9), and Will himself admits that he doesn't know why she kept the letters. Moreover, an earlier reflection upon his father incriminates Will for his inordinate leaning upon and interpreting of the letters, acts he indulges in to compensate for the veritable absence of an image of his father: "I must have seen my father, heard his voice. But there

was nothing. No vague recollections, no stories, no impressions, nothing. He was from Edmonton. I knew that" (8).

He also has to contend with interpretations of the same textual materials by others. Bertha reads the letters before they reach Will, telling Harlen that Will's father wrote a "good letter", that they made her cry; she concludes that Will's father loved Rose a lot (10). Will's attempt to pigeonhole negatively his unknown father is thus compromised by the possibility of oppositional, or at least, alternative readings being equally legitimate. That the chapter concludes with his recollection of the photograph of his parents underscores the tension inherent to his endeavour. The photograph serves as a metaphor for the novel's concern with truth; the tension here is also found at every junction where someone's (usually Will's) identity is being pinned down to one "true" self. Yet, just as photographs offer only a superficial, static representation of a moment in reality, the privileging of one facet of someone's constitution likewise ignores the existence of the rest of the being.

Denying her sons access to the letters is a significant gesture by Will's mother in that it can be read as indicating her express desire to preserve her husband's identity intact for herself and likely also to prevent the boys from forming a largely unfavourable impression of him. Will's insistence on his right to them suggests his right to form an opinion, one as valid as his mother's, one that may contradict her own memory of her husband, if she loved him as Harlen suggests. Her practice of interchanging the men in her stories about the boy's early years results in her offering the portrait of their father she would prefer the boys to know. That she never permits

Will to question her closely about the stories confirms her preference of openness and imprecision to static minutiae with regards to memories:

> I always meant to talk to my mother about Howard Webster, and the time I rode home from the rodeo on his lap. I started to once, just before I left for Toronto, but she laughed and turned away and said I was probably too young to have remembered, and anyway, it was a long time back. (133)

Experience, revisited in the form of memories, is almost always received as subordinate to concrete representations such as letters because of its provisionality; yet, the latter often proves to be more unreliable and even duplicitous.

The novel explores at great length the many shades between the fixtures of fiction and truth--to borrow Harlen Bigbear's keywords, between "probables" and "actuals." In frequent juxtaposition within the narrative are bare explicit lies with those that are tacit yet accepted and sometimes even encouraged. King plays out this comparison through the dichotomy of static representations such as written discourse and photographs versus fluid re-presentations such as experience and orality. Furthermore, he gives consideration to methods and reception of these communications, from meandering to straightforward, and indulgent to no-nonsense. Story-telling in the form of anecdotes, memories, and gossip is a significant domain for this investigation.

> There are no truths....Only stories.
> - Thomas King, Green Grass, Running Water

Within the Medicine River community, complete, accurate disclosure in reporting news is not the first priority; the mere dissemination of a new story takes

precedence. Akin to Harlen Bigbear's practice of passing misery around and getting everyone to take a piece so that grief cannot overwhelm any individual (2), stories are circulated amongst so many people that the facts of any given event are dispersed. More important, the accounts are made multivalent, as opinions and interpretations are added to the original narrative nucleus. In addition, personal histories of the rumour's subject which might be relevant for understanding present events are often affixed to the story. Given these narrative appendages that accompany every bit of news, the intricacy of the narration is certainly no surprise. Similar to Will's analogy of the community as a spider web, stories are likewise interlinked to the degree that no single origin or end is distinguishable. Only the completed product, with each filament in its place, creates an authentic experience. David Plume's arrest for shooting Ray Little Buffalo is a prime example:

> David Plume was arrested on Saturday. I heard about it on Monday from Big John Yellow Rabbit when Big John came in to pick up his passport pictures. He heard it from Sam Belly who was in Cardston buying a bag of cookies and a jar of marshmallow whip at the Red Rooster. Sam didn't see it happen, but he saw the three police cars pull away from in front of the pizza parlour with their lights flashing. Sam Belly is almost as curious as Harlen, and as he walked up the street to see what was going on, he ran into Verna Green who had been in Paul's Pizza Time when the RCMP arrived and arrested David and three of his friends. (249)

Harlen, for once not the progenitor of news, and "not being one to take his information secondhand" (251), sets out to finish this story web: "According to Amos Morley, who told his mother who told Eddie Weaselhead down at the centre who told Harlen, Ray and three of his friends caught David behind the American

Hotel and beat him up" (253). Harlen also corrects the local newspaper's account of the incident, which reported that Ray had been shot and his body found in the river.

In her essay, "'Tell Our Own Stories': Politics and the Fiction of Thomas King,"[10] Percy Walton observes of this episode:

> The indigene is found guilty by that voice of white authority--the newspaper--which contributes to the myth of the violent and explosive native....That Will and, presumably, the reader do not question the story is evidence of the power and the pervasiveness of the semiotic field of the indigene. But as they accept the story, the text implicates them in proliferating cultural stereotypes. (Walton 79)

Certainly, the newspaper as printed word is granted credence due to its so-called dedication to documenting real life and its ability to secure and frame a moment in tangible reality. Similar to photographs, however, newspaper reports merely present one perspective briefly, without following through to their conclusions, particularly with "a back page story." In contrast, Harlen, as primary "meddler" of the community, tends to finish story webs, especially those he may have started himself.

Walton's second statement in the above passage concerns me, though, for the very assumptions she is attempting to eschew, yet, perpetuates. As a "white English-Canadian woman" addressing the novel from "within the culture it seeks to decentre" (Walton 78), she nonetheless puts Will in the same subject position as the reader, presumably herself (or any non-Aboriginal, although she makes no such qualification). I disagree with her argument for Will's (and my, presumably) acceptance of the newspaper's report, because a simpler, more obvious reason exists: David Plume and Ray Little Buffalo have previously expressed hostility towards one another. On three earlier occasions, the two men have nearly come to blows over David's involvement

with AIM and his jacket (194, 198, 252). Consequently, I don't anticipate violence involving these Aboriginals because of "the discourse that has been constructed about the native, a discourse which informs readers' expectations about the text" (Walton 79); I expect it simply because of the histories of and between these characters. Likewise, I suspect that Will and the other Aboriginal characters are inured to violence and other forms of turbulence amongst certain individuals of the community for the same reason. When Jake is discovered fatally shot, "[e]verybody had an opinion, and most of them got back to January" (50), speculating whether Jake's death was actually a suicide, an accidental shooting, or a homicide committed by January, because they all know that Jake had abused January regularly and severely. Similarly, Clyde Whiteman has a history of falling into trouble with the law. Harlen Bigbear is a reformed alcoholic. Relapses into former habits remain definite possibilities.[11]

Past truths, especially those of more recent times, influence strongly interpretations of the present. Furthermore, these representations are rendered more complicated by the practice of collective story construction, particularly with Harlen Bigbear often as both the caretaker of the community network and the spinner of new story webs:

> Helping was Harlen's specialty. He was like a spider on a web. Every so often, someone would come along and tear off a piece of the web or poke a hole in it, and Harlen would come scuttling along and throw out filament after filament until the damage was repaired. Bertha over at the Friendship Centre called it meddling. Harlen would have thought of it as general maintenance. (31)

Sometimes he starts webs where there isn't anything to catch, on the hope that a fibre of a story will land in it (55, 81); sometimes he simply imagines tears in the community's network that need darning. News that Louise is pregnant and has separated from her companion Harold sends Harlen scurrying to spin thread after thread of gossip details for Will:

> "Louise told Betty she had planned it this way. Said she wanted a baby, but didn't want to get married. That's Louise, isn't it?"
> "She's a strong woman."
> "No, I mean the front. You know, Will, lying like that, so everyone will think you're okay."
> "You think..."
> "Sure. She's all alone. Made a mistake. Scared to death. Family will probably disown her. Probably lose all her friends." (30)

This passage demarcates the unmarked "dangerous curves and corners in Harlen's mind" (64), namely that, in order to become involved, Harlen ignores Louise's personality and assumes she is lying. Will's assessment that "You never knew just how far Harlen's 'probables' were from 'actuals', and most of the time, neither did Harlen" (29) corresponds to King's identification of Harlen as a trickster figure.[12] Like Coyote, he is both "creator and destroyer. Harlen is always looking to do good--and sometimes he does good. Other times he gets things totally wrong. Or he creates a situation in which things don't go as well as they should."[13] As a story-teller "temperate in his insistence on the whole truth at once", Harlen analogizes the task of soliciting truth as if it were a "green-broke horse", one that needs to be approached slowly and be befriended, otherwise "you never know which way it's going to run or who it's going to kick" (176-7). The apples he would offer his metaphorical horse are equivalent to the embellishing strands he generously adds to

anyone's lifestory: "No matter who it was, Harlen would always go looking for the good in a person. And even if he couldn't find it, he assumed that it was there, buried somewhere," Will asserts (151-2).

Harlen's generosity towards others' characters, however, compromises his versions of the truth. He has an amazing penchant for bending truth to suit his optimistic vision of reality: he tells Will that Louise will seriously consider his advice that she get married, though Elwood later informs Will that she laughed at it (26); and to encourage Will to buy a battered old canoe, he makes the incredible assertion that the Blackfoot were some of the "world's greatest canoeists" (241). His account of elder Lionel James' history is a telling example for Will:

> I didn't know Lionel James very well, but I had heard stories. Harlen said he was almost one hundred years old. Bertha said he was about sixty-nine. Harlen said Lionel had been a great athlete when he was young, could run for miles. Bertha said he had had a bad drinking problem, spent some time in jail. Harlen said Lionel had been to some of the old-time Sun Dances and had the scars on his chest to prove it. Bertha said he got those in a car crash. But whatever he had been in his youth, he was one of the most respected men on the reserve. (167)

The disparity in accounts is typical for these characters, yet both versions likely form two of the perimeters of the truth. Will's concluding statement is ironically inconclusive; it indicates that he privileges neither rendition.

Harlen is only too happy to fill in gaps--he can "always find allowances lying around" (76)--when "on occasion he has difficulty finding all the parts" of truth, whereas Bertha has "a talent for rescuing the truth from falsehoods and flights of fancy" (176). Bertha is generally a more reliable story-teller because of her vigilance against exaggeration and hearsay. The episode where Harlen misses a wedding

provides illuminating evidence. The prevailing rumour pertaining to Harlen's notable absence is that he has resumed his alcoholic habit. Will falls victim to the community's collective enterprise of deduction: Bud informs him, "Floyd says Harlen's drinking again. *Saw* him at the American the other afternoon. *Looked* pretty bad, Floyd said. Heard him in the bathroom throwing up" (96); when Will confronts Floyd with his rumour, however, he fails to discern the cues of supposition in Floyd's elucidation: "Yeah, I *heard* that, too.... *Heard* he was at some bar the other day. Looked real bad, *I heard*. Throwing up in the toilet" (italics mine) (98). In contrast, when she meets Will at Harlen's house, Bertha zeroes in immediately on the conjecture he is inadvertently perpetuating: "Bud *see* him drinking?" (italics mine), and informs him of the true situation, that Harlen just has the flu (101). The community members' faith in hearsay and neglect of nuances of communication are often at the crux of misinformation.

Harlen may consistently distort the truth to suit his sunny disposition, but he is nonetheless the only character who is relentless in flushing out a narrative from the bramble of conjecture. As Will learns, he insists on full, open disclosure: "Discretion was not one of Harlen's many admirable characteristics. He kept secrets poorly and was more concerned with the free flow of information than with something as greedy as personal privacy" (181). For him, it's "hard to tell half a story" (43); the tangential, frequently historical, details are integral to his circular conceptions of stories and story-telling. On several occasions, Will refers to Harlen's circuitous method of narration (52-3, 72, 126, to cite a few instances); yet, he discovers that

meandering narratives are not exclusive to Harlen. Both Bud and Lionel James demonstrate the same technique and proclivity for *non sequiturs*, prompting Will to observe during conversations with each man, "Harlen always did this to me. I wondered if he had learned it from Bud" (91), and "I was used to conversations with Harlen that didn't make much sense and didn't seem to go anywhere" (169).

I would suggest that, in fact, these characters' circular narrative styles allude to traditional Aboriginal story-telling. The circling, slowly deliberate, repetitive pattern they employ ensures that (historical) details are not overlooked in the course of (re-)telling stories, thereby also rendering the stories more encompassing and expansive. In Green Grass, Running Water, which alternates extensively between the "interfusional" form and that of the "associational", to use King's terms[14], the Aboriginal characters frequently insist on (re-)commencing their stories at the very beginning--not *in medias res* or the present tense--especially when mistakes are made in the narrating.[15] In comparison, Medicine River features episodes incorporating traditional oral elements set within the overall straightforward narrative structure; yet, juxtaposing the traditional oral style used by Harlen with the surrounding modern linear style employed by Will subversively illuminates how easily narrative continuity is disrupted. As the novel's narrator, Will struggles to follow the tales told by Harlen, Bud, and Lionel because no closure or coherence is in sight: "Sometimes Harlen would circle for hours," he demurs, and he can do little to alter this routine. Writing, in contrast, is finite, and therefore, is inherently only an enclosed fragment of a narrative. Furthermore, this story-telling technique prioritizes the narrator-

listener relationship, conferring more significance upon the narrator's present intention in conjunction with both the narrative and the audience, rather than on the mere imparting of a fixed, descriptive meaning or perspective, such as written and visual/graphic discourses offer.[16]

The Aboriginal characters reify the latter concept in their willingness--to varying degrees--to allow bendings of truth, in lighter moments for the art of story-telling itself, in which experiences are transformed into dramatic legends ("We all laughed as though we believed every story" [77]), or, in serious situations, for the collective reparation of the community, for which history is conveniently ignored.[17] The death of Jake Pretty Weasel illustrates how the other characters are able to hold opposing opinions as individuals, yet, cooperate as a group to heal this wound by freezing their discourse pertaining to Jake's character. They bury the true negative aspects of his life with him, electing instead to re-tell (perhaps even re-invent) his better nature: "We all had Jake stories," remarks Will, "and even January was anxious to tell about the times Jake had taken the kids shopping or made a special dinner or brought her home an unexpected and thoughtful present" (51). Moreover, they acquiesce to permitting Jake's fabricated letter represent him--or re-present him, literally. Will concludes, "[I]n the end, all of us began talking about the letter as if Jake had written it....You could see that January wanted it that way, and when you thought about it long enough, it wasn't such a bad thing" (51). Thus, in exceptional circumstances, the Medicine River Blackfoot community will consent to having itself or one of its members framed in time and history, thereby forgoing authentic identity

for artifice in the form of writing for the collective good. Their adherence to, and January's preserving of, the letter for her children as a memoir of their father imply acquiescence to re-membering a partial, immutable, and ultimately fraudulent Jake. To paraphrase a statement by Helen Hoy, the man is dead, long live his discourse.[18]

In this novel, King deals extensively with the interplay between truth/reality and fiction/discourse as it pertains to determining (some)one's identity/ies. He acknowledges that crafted representations frequently stand in place of individuals. The episode involving Jake's letter is one instance; a more prominent example is Will's endeavour to dis/uncover the person his father was, using the discourses of letters, photos, anecdotes, and imagination. The first chapter sets the stage for this investigation, and for what Will and the reader learn about its very process. Will's conviction that his father was a jerk, a bitter assessment apparently corroborated by the content of his father's letters, actually creates an interstice for impediments to truth-telling. Other discourses in the chapter produce a tension against his conclusion, such as his mother's fierce possession of the letters (5-7), and the photo of his parents that evinces their contentment (5, 10). These discrepancies indicate that truth is not so self-evident, and even less so when sought with regards to personal identity.

Further calling into question the ostensible binarism of truth and misrepresentation are the fluid discourses revolving around Will's father. Will is convinced that the stories told by his mother that feature "someone" and other named male subjects actually involve his father: "Each time my mother told her stories, they got larger and better. Sometimes, it was Howard. Sometimes, it was Martin. Sometimes, it

was Eldon. But she never used my father's name" (128). In a conversation with a stranger, Will himself takes the larger-than-life story-telling ability to a new level with his own inventions of his ordinary father: "Maybe it was the way she asked the question, smiling, expecting that I had a father and that what he did was worth talking about. Like Morris....He was never a rodeo cowboy, and out of consideration for Morris, he was never a university professor either" (78, 80). Despite his assertion that he never thinks about or misses his father (80), Will's elaborate story about him clearly indicates a strongly palpable absent presence: "Most of all, I liked to point out, he loved his family, and I was always getting postcards and letters with pictures of him standing against some famous place or helping women and children take sacks of rice off the backs of trucks" (84).[19]

Percy Walton has noted that Will is constructing stories that "will afford him the view of himself and his father that he prefers" (Walton 82). Yet, just as Will incorporates photographs into his fabrications, ironically, a photograph undermines his venture. At the height of his inventing strategy, his mother sends him a photo of his father, presumably the first he has received for his own: "She had pinned the photograph to the shirt pocket. "That's him," the letter said, as if knowing [sic] was an important thing for me to have" (87). The photo's arrival disrupts his construction of a singular, fixed identity for his father. Upon returning to Medicine River, he discovers that his endeavour is impossible because anecdotes about his father contradict his controlled fabrication. Lionel James and George Harley tell him stories that place his father in a sympathetic, even positive, light (7-8, 168, 169, 172-3, 175), and

which thereby refute his previous condemnation. Furthermore, the veracity of his mother's memories are cast into doubt for him because of the surprising disclosure that Howard Webster not only exists, but is as his mother described him (258); therefore, in her stories he may not have been merely a substitute entity for Will's father, but actually himself (127-8). Evidently, the fluidity of oral discourse contravenes with the static discourses of photography and writing with regards to situating an identity. Stories fill in the gaping spaces that surround photos and letters.

The agility of stories and story-telling also affords one a variety of subject positions, of which several shall be occupied and resisted in order to determine one's identity, particularly if one is not part of the dominant culture. "Will requires a past to forge his own identity," Walton asserts (Walton 82). If "to forge" is understood as 'to make (money etc.) in fraudulent imitation,' 'to move forward gradually and steadily' and 'to fabricate, invent' (Concise OED), this statement suits the novel even more aptly. Just as Will realizes that his dad's identity is formed from multiple sources and thus cannot be author-ized by any one, so, too, does he figure that his own selfhood is also a collective endeavour produced by several interstices (including the past and present). Will's first cognizance of himself as a half-blood might have occurred at the price of his memory of his father. Because his father was white, and because the 1876 Indian Act stipulated that an Indian woman lost her Indian status if she married a non-Indian, Will's father had inadvertently placed Will in a doubly disadvantaged situation: he denied him not only his own presence, but also, indirectly, inherent access to the Blackfoot reserve land, his community, and his

extended family, since Will's mother was forced to move off-reserve. Thus, one of Will's first impressions of his father is linked negatively to his identity as an unrecognized Aboriginal in both familial and political terrains.[20]

Will's subsequent pursuit of his white identity in Toronto, though sparsely documented, is useful in illuminating the changes to his perception of the act of occupying identities. It first entails a subconscious elision of his Aboriginal identity. After meeting Susan at an exhibit of contemporary Native art, he makes certain that for their first date, he dresses differently so that "[y]ou couldn't tell [he] was a photographer" (108).

This comment left me dumbfounded. What does a photographer *look* like? My answer came a few lines later, as Susan mentions Basil Johnston's latest book, and asks Will, "You're Indian, aren't you?" (108). Furthermore, in the flashback of Susan's dinner party, Will learns that Susan has mentioned to her friends that he is Native and a photographer--a combination one white guest finds "ironic" because of "the way Indians feel about photographs" (229). Will, then, finds himself squirming to evade being made into an Othered object of fascination by white society presumably because of his appearance.

His relationship with Susan illustrates his efforts to secure his identity as a heterosexual man. His attempts to assume a dominant, "manly" posture results in having his expectations overturned. Upon learning that Susan is married but loves him, Will fancies himself a romantic western hero, one such as the title character of the western in question in Green Grass, Running Water, "The Mysterious Warrior":

"I suppose that's what I was waiting to hear, what I was hoping to hear. And I came to the rescue, galloping across the grass, all sparkling and aglow in the autumn light" (180). When he delivers her a possessive ultimatum ("I told her it was probably time to be making some decisions" [186]), she leaves both her husband and him (188). And when months later Susan invites him to dinner, he assumes patronizingly that her invitation is actually one for reconciliation in disguise: "I could hear the pain in her voice. She needed me. She had needed me before, and I was sure she needed me again....I didn't need to be needed the way Susan needed me, and the sooner I told her that, I told myself, the better I'd feel. There was no sense leading her on" (222). Dinner actually includes thirty other guests, and she has no intention of relinquishing her new freedom (230). Will thus learns that to fix anyone's identity, including his own, is a frustrating and fruitless bid because other's perceptions cannot be contained within one's own designated parameters.

Will's past informs his present in that his interactions as an adult with the Medicine River community indicate both a willingness on his part to let others define themselves and a obstinacy against letting others define him. Harlen Bigbear usually pushes him into various schemes and, in most cases, Will decides, insofar as he can, the extent of his role. He persists in asking out the pregnant Louise when Harlen has every bachelor in town approaching her (33); he elects to be a father figure to South Wing; he resists Harlen's urging to "be the man" in his relationship with Louise, opting instead to have them define themselves. As a mixedblood living on the

periphery of the reserve, he opts to retain this position rather than risk alienation by joining David Plume in his crusades.

In an interview, King has commented on this subject position:

> In that particular story I wanted to deal with the various forms that alienation might take and the ironies that are created as people try to maintain or change their positions....Will wants to be part of the community in Medicine River, but he doesn't know what to do. He doesn't want to go with David and he doesn't want to get in the "dryer," as it were. For that one instance in the book, he's sort of caught out. He goes back in the office, and he turns all the lights on and opens all the doors just to keep himself from being trapped, I suppose, trapped in that dryer, trapped in that van for no reason that he really understands.[21]

Will avoids the entrapment of the métis identity of being an Aboriginal crusader, such as David Plume, or someone "trying to compensate." He also evades being categorized as a detached artist-photographer by heeding the decision of the Blackfoot community to speak for itself and invite him into the group photo. King has commented that this episode is questioning the position of the person making the choices, the decisions: "In that one scene, the group photograph takes itself, as it were. There's no kind of outside agency that is setting the thing up."[22] Will's entering the photo thus breaks down his authority position as well as his identity as an outsider. Furthermore, the community actively assigns him identities amongst and pertinent to themselves: both Harlen and Lionel James introduce him to all of the others so that he gets to know everyone; Floyd's granny ponders adopting him since he has no parents and her own son is deceased; and Lionel hints strongly that he should be a father to South Wing (208-11). Will evidently straddles the line between

the white and Aboriginal worlds and the identities each has to offer. Gerald Vizenor has stated that this provisional position is not uncommon for métis:

> [A] mixed-blood must waver in the blood and it's difficult to waver [sic] the page. You have to find some meaning not in the sides but in the seam in between and that's obviously where a mixed-blood, an earthdiver, a trickster, must try and find all meaning, imaginative meaning....We're trouble, and I'd rather be trouble than an image.[23]

Certainly, the identity sites Will occupies are located "in the seam": he is husband-not-husband to Louise, father-not-father to South Wing, Aboriginal-not-Aboriginal to himself and the government, detached artist-involved artist to the community, and was an outsider-not-outsider until the community embraced him in his art.[24] The community's allocation of identities to him assist in his determining of his selfhood.

As a half-blood who has lived in white society all his life, Will returns to Medicine River to learn about his Aboriginal identity. The impetus for his return is one of his forsaken responsibilities: his mother's death underscores that he had abandoned his role, as the oldest son, of "man of the house" or caretaker of his family (94). Responsibility to the community, his family, and his culture are key to his realization of his Aboriginal heritage. He consents to taking photographs for the Friendship Centre free of charge because Bertha reminds him, "You got responsibilities, you know" (177). He also acts, if somewhat reluctantly, as Harlen's assistant in keeping community relations placid. His more important responsibilities concern Louise and South Wing. "Marriage doctor" Martha Oldcrow links the three of them inextricably with her rattles, and Will demonstrates the solemnity of this bond to him when he tries to remember the song for South Wing (143).

Will's acceptance of these obligations, particularly that to South Wing, harken to his past and childhood. As the critics Jack Butler and Jim Bencivenga noted in their reviews, in the first half of the novel, Will's father is the dominant subject of Will's flashbacks. As the novel progresses, however, and Will assumes a more active role in the lives of Louise and South Wing, his memories shift their focus to his family, notably to his mother. And as his identities shift from fatherless son to man of the house to father figure, he relinquishes his preoccupation with his father by accepting responsibility for South Wing. King elucidates that the father's letters set up a dichotomy for Will because "[t]here are parts of his life that he'll never know and responsibilities that were not taken for him." Moreover, the letters "become a counterpoint to the way in which Will is going to live his own life," and "remind him of what he should do and what he must not become."[25] When Will buys a musical top for South Wing (260), the toy has resonances to the top his father supposedly mailed to him but which never arrived (9). Thus, Will's past is revisited, but he has implemented a critical difference.

By the novel's end, Will has attained the balance between his two ethnic identities, an equilibrium he had capsized by moving away from his people to Toronto. In a culture that emphasizes familial and communal relations, to remain removed or marginalized is a nearly impossible task (unless self-imposed) because one's identity is inextricably bound to that of the rest of the community. The greatest concern for Will's identity in the others' eyes is that he has no living parents, because elders are crucial to teaching the younger generation about their individual and

collective responsibilities. The worried elders are mollified, though, by his formation of a family with Louise. In fact, the novel broadens the definition of family, with this example and also with Joyce's "immediate family" for her portrait, which includes Will, Harlen, the basketball players, Louise and South Wing, and Floyd's grandmother, to name a few. Where the Aboriginal identity is concerned, blood ties are important, but only one of the paramount criteria for self-definition.

Another criterion is one's relationship with the land. Harlen Bigbear underscores the connection between geographic location and self-location: "Can't see Ninastiko from Toronto," he tells Will. "Ninastiko...Chief Mountain. That's how we know where we are. When we can see the mountain, we know we're home" (93). I would suggest that the land, or a specific part of it, acts as a landmark for the Aboriginal identity in that it is an unequivocal representation of our ancestors and our history as a race. Will's return home underscores the idea that the land is the one constant in otherwise variable and malleable explorations of identity/ies, the sole continuum in an otherwise unstable and impermanent existence. As long as this continent endures, so shall the First Nations peoples and their traditions.

In Medicine River Thomas King has deftly crafted a novel that both invites and disrupts notions of truth and of (mis-)representation, of authenticity and identity. He reiterates the significance of story-telling as a malleable discourse that furthers the search for truth and selfhood, particularly for Aboriginals, who ostensibly determine their identity through a collective process. King's inclusion of the presence of history and of geography render his sites of truth and identity radically provisional, yet more

holistic. Will's experiences in Toronto underscore that, as Aboriginals regain space and presence in political and artistic arenas, self-definition becomes more critical than ever in order to avoid being squeezed back into the historical (mis-)representations of Indians that informed racist governmental policies, such as The Indian Act, and also aesthetic images, such as the Will Sampson TV character Harlen imitates (10). Furthermore, competing truth claims, particularly those that challenge normative history, are crucial not only for having suppressed histories and cultures reinstated in North American society, but for simply reclaiming space for the Aboriginal existence to flourish. And by subverting the expectations of characters, readers, and critics, and keeping these audiences in a state of perpetual (intellectual) transition, King both fulfils his responsibilities as an Aboriginal story-teller and vindicates his own rhetoric.

ENDNOTES

[1] Thomas King, Medicine River (Toronto: Penguin, 1991) 25. Subsequent references are to this edition and page numbers will appear parenthetically in the text.

[2] Jack Butler, rev. of Medicine River, by Thomas King, New York Times Book Review 23 Sept. 1990: 29.

[3] Jim Bencivenga, "Searching for Home in High-Plains Canada," rev. of Medicine River, by Thomas King, The Christian Science Monitor 3 Oct. 1990: 13.

[4] David Giddens, rev. of Medicine River, by Thomas King, Quill & Quire Apr. 1990: 26.

[5] Candace Smith, rev. of Medicine River, by Thomas King, Booklist 1 Oct. 1990: 255.

[6] Bert Almon, rev. of Medicine River, by Thomas King, Canadian Book Review Annual 1991 Ed. Joyce M. Wilson (Toronto: Simon & Pierre Publishing, 1992) 157.

[7] Rev. of Medicine River, by Thomas King, Publishers Weekly 10 Aug. 1990: 431.

[8] A couple of reviews even managed to introduce impractical (and meaningless) divisions pertaining to political boundaries: "[Medicine River is] about a group of contemporary *Native Americans* in a small *Canadian* community", states Publishers Weekly; and "Will, a *native American* now 40, returns after his mother's death to his *Canadian hometown*", writes Smith (italics mine).

[9] Marybeth Westman, rev. of Medicine River, by Thomas King, Canadian Woman Studies 14.4 (Fall 1994): 115-16.

[10] Percy Walton, "'Tell Our Own Stories': Politics and the Fiction of Thomas King," World Literature Written in English 30.2 (1990): 77-84. Subsequent references will appear parenthetically in the text.

[11] I realize that Walton's reading of the novel is fashioned to support her argument that King resists the native as Other, offering a positive Aboriginal presence instead, but by pigeonholing the Aboriginal characters to conform to her thesis, she perpetuates the very Othering process she seeks to expose. That she admits to making the text conform to her cultural expectations ("this is, at least to some extent, what I am in the process of doing, for my subjectivity informs my reading" [Walton 78]) is not licence for doing it nonetheless, nor does it augment her position or the Aboriginal struggle to escape historical literary fetters.

[12] Two critics also recognized him as such, but offered no elaboration. See Butler, and R. Welburn, rev. of Medicine River, by Thomas King, Choice Mar. 1991: 1132.

[13] See Constance Rooke, "Interview with Tom King," World Literature Written in English 30.2 (1990): 68.

[14] King defines "interfusional" literature as "a blending of oral literature and written literature." David Latham explains that it "combines elements of the oral and the written in a manner than makes the written word become the spoken word by insisting through

the use of such devices as rhythm, repetition, and revision that the story be read aloud." According to King, "associational" literature describes an Aboriginal community, features a flat narrative line "that ignores the ubiquitous climaxes and resolutions that are so valued in non-Native literature"; in addition, it "leans towards the group rather than the single, isolated character, creating a fiction that de-values heroes and villains in favour of members of a community." See Thomas King, "Godzilla vs. Post-Colonial," World Literature Written in Eng'ish 30.2 (1990): 10-16, and David Latham, "From Richardson to Robinson to King: Colonial Assimilation and Communal Origination," British Journal of Canadian Studies 8.2 (1993): 180-189.

[15] King employs this repetitive technique (and others) in his short stories that stylistically harken back to Aboriginal oral literature. Several include: "One Good Story, That One", "Magpies", "The One About Coyote Going West", and "A Coyote Columbus Story."

[16] Although multiple narrators/perspectives are considered to be characteristic of post-modern fiction, King is actually harkening back to traditional Aboriginal oral narrating styles, where often the story and its meaning change overtly with the narrator. He is also using this device with a more political aim in mind.

[17] When his mother's friend Erleen is accused of theft, Will observes that his mother Rose pretends to be indignant along with Erleen even though she knows Erleen steals frequently from the grocery store (70).

[18] Helen Hoy, "'Nothing But the Truth': Discursive Transparency in Beatrice Culleton," Ariel 25.1 (January 1994): 161.

[19] That Will includes fictional photos harkens back to his first lie about his father on a flight; the other passenger had shown him photos of her family: "There was Morris and Laura and William and Pooch the cat" (78). For many people, photos serve as witness to authenticate stories and experiences.

[20] As an adult, Will is further subjected to white law: upon returning to Medicine River, he is denied a loan from DIA because he is a non-status Indian (99). (Similarly, Eddie Weaselhead is denied the director's position at the Friendship Centre because of Indian politics 55). One could add that even as a boy, Will was denied a make-believe reservation in the basement of his apartment building when Mrs. Oswald removes the Bentham Reserve sign and informs the children that "White people do not live on reserves", and that they are all Canadians (44).

[21] Thomas King, qtd. in Rooke, 65.

[22] Thomas King, qtd. in Rooke, 63.

[23] Gerald Vizenor, qtd. in Helen Hoy, 164.

[24] As the narrator, Will also occupies the interstice between reliable and duplicitous story-teller. In chapters two and three, he explicitly mentions the art of lying, and the difficulty he has practising it artfully (21, 32, 38). Moreover, he twice refers to the danger of being caught in a lie (42, 80). Will is easily duped by others' tales because

he assumes that everyone else endures as much trouble lying as he does. King thus establishes Will's character in such a manner that the reader has no reason to doubt Will's credibility as a narrator. The reader, however, is susceptible not only to Will's gullible pursuits of the truth to the rumours, but to yarns spun by Will himself. He overturns his role of straightman to Harlen by engaging in the same kind of narrating tricks as Harlen, such as in his chronicling of the blood ties between Big John Yellow Rabbit and Eddie Weaselhead (52). Moreover, he even assumes Harlen's role as meddler by setting up Harlen and Bertha romantically (182-85). Therefore, Will subverts his narrative designs in relation to both the reader and some of the characters.

[25] Thomas King, qtd. in Rooke, 69.

Continuity, Perseverance, and the AlterNative Tradition in Green Grass, Running Water

King's second novel, a culmination of the ideas presented in his stories collected in One Good Story, That One and in his first novel, Medicine River, bears a title that resonates with historical significance: the phrase, "as long as the grass is green and the waters run", signifying perpetuity, was inserted into eighteenth and nineteenth century treaties that ceded Aboriginal lands to the governments of Canada and the United States. King's assigning it such prominence underscores contemporary scepticism and anger over the systematic dismissal of the clause and its meaning from the documents Aboriginals signed either in duress or to solidify cordial relations with the Europeans. Reviewer Sandra Martin notes that,

> [i]n telling the story of an oppressed people, there are certain trigger words that are much more than letters strung together in a familiar order; they are symbols so loaded with loss and brutality that using the words invokes a shadow of the original suffering. For Jews the word is Holocaust; for women, rape; for blacks, slavery; for Indians it is land.[1]

More important than simply highlighting this phrase's legal (in)significance, King revitalizes the phrase's lost meaning by emphasizing continuously in the novel the perseverance of both First Nations peoples and the Earth itself against the onslaught of technology.

In his book, In the Absence of the Sacred: The Failure of Technology & the Survival of the Indian Nations, environmentalist-author Jerry Mander observes:

> the natives' struggles to maintain their lands and sovereignty is [sic] often directed against [multi-national] corporations, or technology, or military. More to the point, it is directed against a mentality, and an approach to the planet and to the human place on Earth, that native

> people find fatally flawed. For all the centuries they've been in contact with us, they've been saying that our outlook is missing *something*.[2]

That "something" is a holistic, multidimensional conception and approach to reality and life on this Earth--what King terms a "land ethic": "a particular sense of that physical world that is so much a part of culture and so much a part of the ceremonies and everything else."[3] Aboriginal people comprehend that the Earth is the greatest survivor, enduring individuals' lifespans and generations of creatures. Each human being arrives integrated with it, and must ensure that his or her brief stay does not disrupt his/her harmonious co-existence with Nature. Using this conception of continuity as this essay's framework, I shall explore the related issues of: 1) the conflict between technology and the natural world; 2) the image of "Indians" and their traditions versus the reality of their present day existence; and 3) the significance and methods of storytelling as a (subversive) means of preserving Aboriginal cultures, especially against the assimilationist forces of dominant, white North American societies.

The aboriginal recognition (though not exclusive to the First Nations) of the ephemerality of human existence, of the importance of acknowledging other forms of life as equals, is the opposite to the Eurocentric life vision. Presuming to have dominion over the Earth and its non-human life-forms, Westerners try to root themselves in the fruition of their collective intellect, namely technological advancement, since science and industry have brought about vast secularization. Vine Deloria, Jr. defines this ideological distinction between nations in terms of "natural" and "hybrid" peoples:

> The natural peoples represent an ancient tradition that has always sought harmony with the environment. Hybrid peoples are the product of what I refer to...as ancient genetic engineering that irrevocably changed the way these people view our planet. I can think of no other good reason why the peoples from the Near East--the peoples from the Hebrew, Islamic, and Christian religious traditions--first adopted the trappings of civilization and then forced a peculiar view of the natural world on succeeding generations. The planet, in their view, is not our natural home and is, in fact, ours for total exploitation.[4]

The Earth has been and continues to be ravaged as a gargantuan natural resource in the name of "progress" or "technical evolution." Success is measured by the degree in which the natural world can be altered or subjugated.

Although transformation is essential for the survival of all living things, including the human species, technological progress, with some exceptions, tends to be insidious, a fact its originators and benefactors conceal.[5] Technological advancements are promoted and received as being good and beneficial for society at large, though their true usages and capitalist merits are clandestinely centralized. Not only is modern technology autocratic, it furthers the homogenous, singular concept of modern human existence of the élite who control it. Deloria, Jr. elucidates:

> The traditional evolutionary interpretation of human societies assumes that one group of people was inherently brighter than the others, invented the wheel, invented written languages, established legal codes and political institutions, domesticated plants and animals, discovered metallurgy, and as a final gesture began to direct our species toward the control of nature, thereby banishing the superstitions that composed earlier expressions of religion.[6]

Mander remarks that technology's inherent hostility against diversity (which involves equity of sorts) thus renders it antagonistic towards Nature also:

> Living constantly inside an environment of our own invention, reacting solely to things we ourselves have created, we are essentially living

> *inside our own minds*. Where evolution was once an interactive process between human beings and a natural, unmediated world, evolution is now an interaction between human beings and our own artifacts. We are essentially coevolving with ourselves in a weird kind of intraspecies incest. (32)

To continue the incest metaphor to its conclusion, despite its advertised benefits, industrialized technology is essentially self-destructive, destined to exhaust its technolo-gene pool because it is incompatible with the Earth's natural systems. And as part of the machinery, human beings are being propelled inexorably towards extinction. The very science that Westerners conceive of as the foundation of modern civilization not only will *not* grant immortality or permanence of any sort, it will eventually lead to the annihilation of life on Earth. Modern technology, to modify Daphne Marlatt's phrase, thus leaves humankind unwittingly "circling the downspout of [technological] Empire."[7]

King illuminates this duplicity of technology and of its proponents--both promote the lie that technology creates permanence--by juxtaposing technological advancement against the perpetuity of the natural world. The paramount confrontation within the novel is between the artificial dam and the water it seeks to contain, with both assuming metonymic significance in that they represent oppositional ideologies. The Aboriginals resist this technical invasion because to them, technology by itself is equated with stasis, paralysis. It disrupts the fluidity of intrinsic change to them and the land, thwarting natural, gradual growth with and within their surroundings. It also threatens to impede drastically their practising of cultural ceremonies. Harley informs Eli that the dam is preventing the river from carrying

nutrients to the cottonwoods, the type of tree used in the Sun Dance, and concludes, "And if the cottonwoods die, where are we going to get the Sun Dance tree?"[8] Evidently, for the Blackfoot, the destruction of the surrounding nature spells doom for their culture as well.

Since first contact with the First Nations and notably this century, many (male) Europeans and Euro-Americans have demonstrated on this continent that they seem compelled to subjugate Nature to the degree that their individual superiority is tangible--even if the end result holds far-reaching ecological and sociological consequences. This need to dominate, Mander notes, is hardly foreign to the field of technology:

> Today's technological pioneers consider themselves original thinkers, but they are only the latest in a long line of advocates for the same set of propositions, the most prominent of which is that nature sets no limits on the degree to which humans may intervene in and alter the natural world....In doing so, they are acting in service to the fundamental principle that has informed technical evolution in the modern era: *If it can be done, do it....*
>
> The assumptions have been gaining strength for thousands of years, fed both by Judeo-Christian religious doctrines that have de-sanctified the earth and placed humans in domination over it; and by technologies that, by their apparent power, have led us to believe we are some kind of royalty over nature, exercising Divine will. (187)

This individualist, hierarchical attitude of one ruling all, of Nature as disposable, is at the crux of the novel's polemics concerning the place of technology in modern life. The concept of humans as discrete from the natural world soon extends to the realm of humanity itself, where not only do humans become estranged from one another, but they also disassociate themselves from the repercussions of technology's incorporation into their collective existence.

Cliff Sifton, the dam's designer, epitomizes this quandary. He distances himself from both the politics involved in the dam's inception and the dam itself. He tells Eli that the dam isn't his, and that the legal battle is "[n]othing personal" (95-97). Nevertheless, he considers the dam a creation of his own making: he personalizes it by assigning it a sex, "She's going to be a beauty," and refers to it twice as "a beauty" (95, 115). Sifton seems oblivious to the implications of designating his prized object as female, namely that in this patriarchal society, men have long made such an identification for the (unconscious) reason of their having the object of desire in their possession and under their control. As the legal battle drags on, however, he admits ruefully to having chosen the wrong enterprise to oversee: "You know...I could have had the big project in Quebec....But I said no. I want to do the job in Alberta. That's what I said" (115).

This contradictory sentiment of detachment-possession is typical for an advocate of modern technology. He erroneously perceives technology as politically neutral; he informs Eli: "That's the beauty of dams. They don't have personalities, and they don't have politics. They store water, and they create electricity. That's it" (95). Eli's response, "So how come so many of them are built on Indian land?" (95), however, indicates that Eli is aware of technology's inherent political bias. Unlike Sifton, he and the other Aboriginal characters are conscious of its autocratic inclination, that "certain technologies turn out to be useful or beneficial only for certain segments of society" (Mander 35). The Band council considers nicknaming the dam either the Grand Goose or the Golden Goose because of the promised fortune

and because "as Sam Belly put it, that's about all Indians ever got from the government, a goose" (100). The rhetoric of technology obscures its élitist tendencies until its realization renders all debate moot. The history of the construction of the dam illuminates the sober realities that accompanied the dam's development:

> The irony, Charlie mused, was that once Duplessis started construction on the dam, nothing stopped it. Environmental concerns were cast aside. Questions about possible fault lines that ran under the dam were dismissed. Native land claims that had been in the courts for over fifty years were shelved.
>
> "Once you start something like this," Duplessis's chief engineer had told an inquiry board, "you can't stop. Too damn [dam?] dangerous." (100)

Eli's assertion that "[n]one of the recommended sites was on Indian land" (95) illuminates the disadvantaged position held continually by First Nations peoples in the asymmetrical social and political infrastructure that constitutes Canadian society. The "[o]ther factors" that Sifton says were considered in selecting the dam site translate into two-fold victimization for the Indian band. Not only were the Blackfoot (like other bands) displaced from their ancestral lands, but despite assurances that the reserve relegated to them is wholly theirs, they in fact remain constantly vulnerable--often without receiving compensation--to the governments' unilateral authority to plunder natural resources and mutilate land anywhere within the territory designated "Canada." As historically silenced peoples, First Nations groups struggle yet to make their dissenting voices heard over the maelstrom of government-endorsed, corporate machines. Not surprisingly, then, Sifton's self-acquitting rejoinder of "I just build them, Eli. I just build them" elicits a sceptical "So you say" from Eli (95). Sifton

does not regret having built the dam, but rather, feels burdened by the thwarted fulfilment of his enterprise.

Sifton demonstrates that he is oblivious, perhaps even indifferent, to the extensive repercussions that modern technologies impact upon people and Nature. He exhibits a compartmentalized view of both technological progress and the natural world; everything is a discrete segment, independent and disposable. His aforementioned description of the dam is one example; another, more telling, episode is his exchange with Eli about the significance of the cabin:

> "Nothing for you here....One of these days we're going to open the floodgates, the water is going to pour down the channels, the generators are going to start producing electricity, and this house is going to turn into an ark."
>
> "This is my home."
>
> "Hell, what this is is a pile of logs in the middle of a spillway. That's what it is." (120)

Not only is Sifton insensitive to the nostalgic relevance of the cabin for Eli as an emblem of his familial history, he dismisses anything remotely organic in origin. When Eli points out the dam's ultimate vulnerability to time, Sifton reassures him of its permanence--even if it is somewhat flawed: "It's not going to break, Eli. Oh, it'll crack and it'll leak. But it won't break. Just think of the dam as part of the natural landscape" (121). His fragmentary mode of thought leads him to conclude that he can simply insert the dam into the natural world without any noteworthy consequences. He mistakenly conceives Nature as simply an inferior predecessor to a mechanized, metallicized environment. Its parts can and should be replaced with artificial, superior components until humankind is ultimately the sole organic creature, left to

reign in its technosphere. The conception of technologies and their final realization are paramount. The rest is mere details.

The notion of humanity enclosing itself in a metallic environment is achieved--if only on a small scale--by Bill Bursum, proprietor of the Home Entertainment Barn. A driven entrepreneur who believes Machiavelli's The Prince is about "[p]ower and control--the essences of effective advertising" (109), Bursum creates "The Map", a wall display of 200 television sets crudely configured as a map of North America. He considers The Map as more than an exhibit: a "unifying metaphor", it was "a concept that lay at the heart of business and Western civilization" (249), one that would have a "cultural impact" on customers (108). His thinking parallels that of Cliff Sifton in that he considers technology the modern authority, and that those who can manipulate it can thus manage the reality around them more effectively:

> The Map. Bursum loved the sound of it. There was a majesty to the name. He stepped back from the screens and looked at his creation. It was stupendous. It was more powerful than he had thought. It was like having the universe there on the wall, being able to see everything, being in control. (109)

To Bursum, technology grants autonomy from the unpredictabilities of contemporary reality. As an integral element of his life, it provides him with tangible stability while simultaneously allowing him to monitor it.

Technology, however, has a surreptitious hold on Bursum's idea of the priorities in life. He venerates technical development to the point of deification. To him, the new presence of The Map elevates his store to quasi-religious proportions: "It's like being in church," he tells his employee, Ms. Minnie Smith. "Or at the

movies" (109). In assigning equal social prominence to both the church and the movie theatre, Bursum merges industrialized technology with religion. George Morningstar submits the same concept when he attempts to convince Latisha to permit him to photograph the Sun Dance: "It's almost the twenty-first century, Country. Look, they let you take pictures in church all the time. Hell, everything the pope does is on television" (316).

Bursum's lowering the status of the church and elevating that of the theatre suggests that, to him, technology is the contemporary god of Western society. The description of his first screening of his favourite Western movie--a romanticized version of "Indians"--The Mysterious Warrior, on The Map (his version of the altar or the crucifix?) corroborates this supposition: "'Yes!' Bursum whispered as the movie opened with a shot across Monument Valley, and he clutched his hands in his lap *as if he was praying*" (157, italics mine).

Bursum has embraced modern technology as his idol because it constitutes the one realm of modern existence in which he can proceed and control with relative ease. He admits to having failed to keep pace with the more relevant progresses made in socio-cultural domains:

> He just couldn't keep everything straight. At first it had been fun. Ms. For God's sake, it sounded like a buzz saw warming up. He had tried to keep up, but after a while it became annoying....
>
> Indians were the same way....[Y]ou couldn't call them Indians. You had to remember their tribe, as if that made any difference, and when some smart college professor did come up with a really good name like Amerindian, the Indians didn't like it....
>
> The world kept changing and you had to change with it. Otherwise you could go crazy like that nut in Montreal....

> Make money. The only effective way to keep from going insane in a changing world was to try to make money. (156)

A capitalist approach to life is the sacrifice demanded by the technological juggernaut. Technology is inherently élitist; to possess it--or even simply to have access to it--requires money and oftentimes, power. Thus, it imposes its hierarchical imperative upon those who would utilize it. Just as it requires absolute supremacy over the natural world, so does it insist that its users extort the same amongst humankind, regardless of the political correctness of their actions. In fact, technology and, by extension, capitalism both covertly endorse the ignoring of strides made in social, cultural, and political spheres of modern Western society because these advancements impede the first principle of technological evolution, cited earlier: if it can be done, do it. Like Sifton, Bursum believes the axiom, "the end justifies the means", and technology, as a homogenizing autocratic deity, will not tolerate any other idols, particularly those in the form of alternative knowledges.

Bursum's end, to remain sane in a world undergoing rapid social change, however, is paradoxically undermined by his capitalist means, demanded by technology. Capitalism's hierarchies create alienating gulfs between people. Without human connection, one cannot be kept apprised of social evolution; consequently, further estrangement ensues. Compounding the problem is the distancing effect of successive new levels of technical invention, each of which places us "even deeper within technical consciousness and further away from organic reality" (Mander 188).[9] Thus, the profound alienation caused by the autocratic worldview demanded and

reinforced by technology causes the insanity Bursum is trying to prevent. Mander terms this resulting isolation "the madness of the astronaut":

> uprooted, floating in space, encased in our metal worlds, with automated systems neatly at hand, communicating mainly with machines, following machine logic, disconnected from the earth and all organic reality, without contact with a multidimensional, biologically diverse world and with the nuances of world views entirely unlike our own, unable to view ourselves from another perspective, *we* [Westerners] are alienated to the nth degree. (188)

Evidently, despite professions of serving the greater good of humanity, both technology and capitalism prioritize egocentricism: the needs or desires of one should supersede the those of the collective.

Not only does technology exact a tremendous toll upon the internal and external worlds, but industry proponents fraudulently promote it as infallible--a most enticing quality to those seeking a modern deity. Bursum learns this unsavoury truth in dramatic fashion, when the climactic ending to his favourite Western is drastically altered to depict the killing of John Wayne by Indians: "'Well, something sure as hell got screwed up,' said Bursum, looking at the remote in his hand. 'Damn. You put your faith in good equipment and look what happens'" (268). He is just beginning to realize that anything constructed (from artificial materials) by humans is inherently transient precisely because it is inert and fixed, which is antithetical to the Earth's changing rhythms. With time, machines become obsolete, inefficient, and eventually break down.

Technologies of the magnitude of the dam, however, that literally carve themselves a niche in the natural world, leave a hollow gorge as testament to the

havoc they have wreaked upon natural systems. Bursum's Map symbolizes this void created by technology. The description of its initialization, that "[a]ll two hundred screens glowed silver, creating a sense of space and great emptiness at the end of the store" (108), suggests that, as a synthetic embodiment of this continent, The Map fails miserably at representing the multidimensional, diverse biological reality of this land. Unlike The Map which conveys its "great emptiness", Turtle Island has never been impoverished of life.

Bursum, a man who yearns for the forgotten romance of human heroics, wants the best of both worlds: to possess modern technical "conveniences", yet also to enjoy the complex wonders of Nature. His lakeshore property offers him such an utopian retreat:

> He could see the world from here. To the east was the dam. Bursum could just see the lip of the structure and the control tower, and he imagined the engineers moving back and forth, checking the turbines, running tests, drinking coffee. Beyond that was the prairies, a wondrous landscape that ran all the way to Ontario.
>
> To the west, beyond the lake and the trees, the mountains ran north to Banff and Jasper and south into Montana. (336)

His version of "the world", one that merges technology and Nature harmoniously, is, of course, idealistic and illusory; the dam is not functioning. In reality, the two forces are diametrically opposed to one another; given the current impasse between the water and the dam, one must yield. In light of the above exploration of the relationship between technology and Nature, the outcome is clear.

Eli asks Sifton: "What happens when it breaks?" (120).

* * *

The endurance of organic life is contingent upon the ability to transform. As mentioned earlier, Nature has survived the onslaught of technology because it evolves continuously. Like a river, it remains constantly in flux, shifting directions incessantly, accommodating--to various degrees--foreign elements, but remaining undeterred from its original course.

Cultures likewise must sustain the delicate balance of transformativity and coherence to persevere. A breeze skimming a river's surface can move the water against the current, and thus cause it to run in opposite directions within the same stream. So, too, must a people's culture be as fluid: accommodating certain modern fixtures while maintaining traditions. Ideological clashes occur between Aboriginal and White North American cultures because given the latter's championing of materialism, technical progress, and capitalism, it comprehends "tradition" as referring solely to antiquity.

In Green Grass, Running Water, the White characters perceive the past as something dead, with no meaningful connection to the present or the future. (I refer to Whites despite this age of multi-culturalism because the Indian, as Daniel Francis notes, is the invention of the European, beginning as a White man's mistake and becoming his fantasy. Francis quotes Robert Berkhofer Jr.'s assertion that "[s]ince the original inhabitants of the Western Hemisphere neither called themselves by a single term nor understood themselves as a collectivity, the idea and the image of the Indian must be a White conception."[10]) For them, reality is the here and now.

Material objects and abstractions of significance in the past which have not changed with time are extraneous today.

The crux of the battles being waged over the operation of the dam is treaty rights. The treaties, as written contracts *per se*, can be seen as a form of progress. Western societies and institutions have consistently privileged the written word over the spoken. But as a palpable object, they are also static. Words on paper do not change; this rigidity is integral to their authority. Interpretations can change, however, and this fluidity is the basis of the Alberta government's ongoing court case. The government is attempting to convince the courts to permit it to manipulate its past promises to its advantage. On the subject of white attitudes towards treaties, Mander observes:

> Americans tend to view the treaties as 'ancient' though many were made less than a century ago--more recently, for example, than any well-established laws and land deals among whites. Americans, like their government and the media, view treaties with Indian nations differently than treaties with anyone else. (202-3)

Like other forms of technology, historical documents such as treaties are disposable when they no longer serve their purpose or are perceived as outdated. Sifton informs Eli Stands Alone that "the government felt generous back in the last ice age, and made promises it never intended to keep" (117); thus, the treaties "aren't worth a damn" (note pun on dam), having been made only "for convenience" (119). The process of replacing them with more modern records becomes complicated, however, when the other party, here the Blackfoot, contests modification of the originals. In this case, the authority of the written word and the colonial judicial

system backfire; although the dam is built, Eli utilizes the juridical process to obstruct its operation. His problem, according to Bill Bursum, is that he is investing too much worth into the agreements, in the actual *words* recorded in the treaty:

> As long as the grass is green and the waters run. It was a nice phrase, all right. But it didn't mean anything. It was a metaphor. Eli knew that. Every Indian on the reserve knew that. Treaties were hardly sacred documents. They were contracts, and no one signed a contract for eternity. No one. Even the E-Z Pay contracts Bursum offered to his customers to help make a complete home entertainment system affordable never ran much past five or ten years. (224)

Bursum reductively interprets the treaty in business terms, whereas Eli understands the magnitude of its consequences for the very survival of his people. A "contract" signed "for eternity" is a crucial vehicle for aboriginals' resistance to ongoing cultural genocide. The words of the treaty are important for their very ability to flex in favour of the Blackfoot. As long as they have rights and land reserves entrenched in a discourse recognized by the White legal system, they cannot be forced to abandon their cultural heritage. Thus, despite its efforts to push the Aboriginals into the twentieth century, the government finds itself trapped in the nineteenth by its predecessors' use of the technical advancement, the written document. A government "generous back in the last ice age", however, will certainly not be so mistaken in modern times.

The Eurocentric compulsion to change and control translates into humiliation with regards to the survival of Aboriginal cultures. As mentioned earlier, Eurocentric tenets indicate that diversity (especially amongst life principles), is to be discouraged, since it fosters a pluralistic distribution of power and control. The resisting

perseverance of Aboriginals, as opposition to assimilation and therefore to cultural annihilation, is an affront to supremacist Eurocentric ideology--"One of life's little embarrassments," Eli wryly ascertains. The enduring presence of alternative knowledges indicates that the Euro-American doctrine of technology/capitalism isn't sovereign--a most infuriating fact, considering that its alternatives are conceived by (noble) savages. Mander comments on this "fundamental rationalization" implemented against the land and Aboriginals:

> ...our society represents the ultimate expression of evolution, its final flowering. It is this attitude, and its corresponding belief that native societies represent an earlier, lower form on the evolutionary ladder, upon which we occupy the highest rung, that seem to unify all modern political perspectives: Right, Left, Capitalist, and Marxist. (7)

Eli's successful resistance demonstrates that not only are his people and their alternative beliefs re-emerging, they are still powerful. Just as the water eventually breaks free of the dam, rolling on in the valley "as it had for eternity" (347), so do Aboriginals defy the restraints imposed by dominant white North American society. A remark by Sifton seems indicative of the colonizers' posture: "Who'd of guessed that there would still be Indians kicking around in the twentieth century" (119).

The survival of First Nations peoples surprised the white colonizers and continues to surprise many of their descendants because the image of the "Indian" has barely evolved over the centuries. In contrast with the fluid reality and cultures of Aboriginals, the white images have mostly remained static from the time of first contact--a strange phenomenon given their compulsion towards progress and evolution. King submits several stereotypes within the novel for exploration, with

special attention given to those presented by the mass media, particularly visual/film, and literature. I will investigate the responses and effects they garner from both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultures, the assumptions the images are based upon, and the agendas supporting these stagnant images.

The novel, not unlike reality for Aboriginals, is inundated with subtle and blatant racist assumptions about First Nations peoples proffered by White people. Similar to the Whites' consideration of treaties, Aboriginals are also seen as artifacts, particularly with regards to "Indianness." The novel presents the gamut of images of the Indian: Savage, Noble Savage, conceptual Relics--"stone-age" people obstructing progress, Mystic Shamans, and so forth. What is disturbing about these identities is not so much that they exist--Daniel Francis points out that when two disparate cultures meet they tend to interpret each other in terms of stereotypes[11]--but rather, that they continue to be perpetuated by the media as real, true, and contemporary. The first set of images I would like to explore are those perpetuated by literature.

> *Many moons comechucka...hahahahahahahahahaha.*
> - Lone Ranger, Green Grass, Running Water (9)

King manipulates two fictional works involving characters of colour, namely Defoe's Robinson Crusoe and Cooper's Leatherstocking tales (The Last of the Mohicans, *et al.*), to reveal the racism and imperialism entrenched in those important texts. Thought Woman's encounter with Crusoe, though brief, highlights the white supremacist ideology that informed travel literature:

> Under the bad points, says Robinson Crusoe, as a civilized white man, it has been difficult not having someone of color around whom I could educate and protect.
>
> What's the good point? says Thought Woman.
>
> Now, you're here, says Robinson Crusoe. (245)

King expands on the white man's superiority complex in his revision of Cooper's story. Old Woman meets Nathaniel "Nasty" Bumppo, who promptly insists she must be Chingachgook, the Indian he has relented to accept as a friend. When Old Woman denies this identity, Nasty resorts to racist deductive reasoning: "Nonsense....I can tell an Indian when I see one. Chingachgook is an Indian. You're an Indian. Case closed" (327). Not only does he engage in homogenizing ethnic (and gender) identities, he then goes on to indulge in defining Aboriginals in terms of racially-essentialist biological and cultural stereotypes:

> Indians have a keen sense of smell, says Nasty Bumppo. That's an Indian gift....Indians can run fast. Indians can endure pain. Indians have quick reflexes. Indians don't talk much. Indians have good eyesight. Indians have agile bodies. These are all Indian gifts, says Nasty Bumppo. (327)

His defining of Whites, on the other hand, in terms of abstract qualities--compassionate, patient, spiritual, philosophical, etc.--leads Old Woman to infer dryly that Whites are superior and Indians inferior. "Exactly right," confirms Nasty. "Any questions?" (328). Daniel Francis argues that the stereotype of Aboriginals has historically shifted according to the relations between them and the Europeans and the agenda of the latter. As First Nations tribes resisted the ambitions of the colonizers, the Imaginary Indian degenerated from the Noble Savage into the blood-thirsty Savage. Moreover, racial theories postulating the biological inferiority of the First

Nations flourished in the nineteenth century (221). Together, these stereotypes justified the extermination or marginalization of Aboriginals amidst the advent of White settlers and a superior civilization. Consequently, the prevalence of these images of the Indian in literature written in the colonial epoch is hardly surprising.

The tenacity of the Imaginary Indian in modern literature, especially in a perennial genre, the western romance, however, is cause for speculation. In the novel, the market for the western is shown to have scarcely diminished over the years, despite the historical specificity and inaccuracy of its subject matter. Eli Stands Alone frequently receives new, contemporary books from Sifton, several of them westerns (135). In addition, at the beginning of their relationship, his wife Karen supplied him with westerns and other books about Indians to read: "Histories, autobiographies, memoirs of writers who had gone west or who had lived with a particular tribe, romances of one sort or another" (136). Eli's aversion to these works suggests two possibilities: he is uncomfortable with being reminded of his ethnic origin, or he is resisting further indoctrination of mostly non-Aboriginals' conceptions of the Indian. Karen likes "the *idea* that Eli was Indian" (137, italics mine), and proceeds to romanticize him as such: she deems him her "Mystic Warrior", as mysterious as the land depicted in Group of Seven paintings (138).[12] Her father, who has an extensive collection of westerns, likewise subscribes to the otherworldly quality attributed to the Indian: "Thought you Indians had keen eyes," he tells Eli (139).

Such romanticization is prevalent because the current ostracization and corresponding invisibility of Aboriginals leads many non-Aboriginal North Americans to believe that this continent's indigenous peoples really are extinct, or near extinction. The notion that the First Nations are a vanishing race is entrenched historically in the colonization of North America, particularly of the West. Daniel Francis delineates its fostering by North American railways, including the CPR, who promulgated the opportunity for its travellers to see wild Indians in their "natural setting", before everything changed. He quotes an observation by Edward Roper, a British traveller who in 1890 was impressed by the indifference Canadians bore towards the Indians: "'The Canadians seemed to regard them as a race of animals which were neither benefit nor harm to anyone, mentioning that they were surely dying out, and that when they were all gone it would be a good thing.'"[13] With regards to Indians, the tourists' quest for novelty takes on urgency.

The concept of the Indian as a vanishing novelty is not lost upon King. His depiction of Charlie Looking Bear's trip to Blossom features a rental car agent who "chirp[s] away about the points of interest in and around Blossom. There [are] old Indian ruins and the remains of dinosaurs just to the north of town and a real Indian reserve to the west" (126; why "real"? Are there fake Indian reserves?). If we read "real" as referring to "Indian", then it suggests that Aboriginals, contained within a predetermined square space designated by White colonizers, are captives therein, just as the White's conceptualization of the "real Indian" is confined to the realm of their

imagination.[14] The novel explores what Terry Goldie has noted as the particular quandary in which the contemporary native is trapped:

> The indigene of today continues to be a deviant, the drunk and prostitute...but loses the metaphysical resonance of the Other. The present indigene is deindigenized, no longer valid, so the focus of indigenization must be the 'real' indigenes, the resonances of the past.[15]

To this observation, Percy Walton adds, "The native of the present has no presence."[16] As a point of interest lumped in with ruins and dinosaur remains, Aboriginals, like the treaties, are perceived and portrayed as artifacts.

The literary Imaginary Indian is a conceptual relic because its image is fixed on Whites' interpretation of historically-specific Aboriginals. First Nations peoples no longer live in teepees or dress in buckskins, but White writers and advertisers will not relinquish these cultural signifiers (and others they themselves have fabricated). Francis argues that, in actuality, White writers depend on them:

> Many of the images of Indians which appeared in advertisements were intended to be positive. They reveal a widespread admiration for qualities which the public associated with "Indianness": bravery, physical prowess, natural virtue. Of course, these were qualities Indians were thought to have possessed in the distant past, before contact with the White Man. Advertisements did not feature Indians in suits or dresses; they did not highlight life on the reserve or on the other side of the tracks....Advertising [and literature] reinforced the belief that the best Indian was the historical Indian. (176)

Unfortunately, as demonstrated by the European stories recounted by King, the Whites' conception of the Indian is so obdurate that the non-Aboriginal literary and mythological characters can only see Aboriginals by their exotic identity. Rangers want to rename Ahdamn "Little Beaver or Chingachgook or Blue Duck"--ironically,

since they think the name, Tonto, is "stupid" (58); Ishmael wants Changing Woman to become Queequeg (163); A. A. Gabriel designates Thought Woman to be Mary and Old Coyote a snake (226); Robinson Crusoe later tries to deem her Friday (245); and Nasty first insists that Old Woman is Chingachgook, then tries to assign her a "better killer name", suggesting several (White) alternatives (327, 329-30).

This issue of renaming is obviously an attempt to impose an Other-like identity.[17] More important, King suggests that this superficial imposition works only one way: from the dominant subject to the subordinate object. When Changing Woman tries to assume Ishmael's identity in Florida, the soldiers refute it outright: "Ishmael! says a short soldier with a greasy moustache. This isn't an Ishmael. This is an Indian" (188). Soldiers likewise deny Thought Woman the identity of Robinson Crusoe for that of "another Indian" (270). And Old Woman, upon appropriating the name Hawkeye is promptly arrested "[f]or trying to impersonate a white man" (330). Evidently, an Aboriginal's name is but one racial signifier, and is subordinate to that of appearance. The episodes involving First Woman as the Lone Ranger confirm this postulate. By simply donning a black mask, she is immediately recognized as the cultural icon (83, 349); in her first encounter with rangers, they even recognize her initially as an Aboriginal:

> It looks like the work of Indians, says those live rangers. Yes, they all say together. It looks just like the work of Indians. And those rangers look at First Woman and Ahdamn.
>
> Definitely Indians, says one of the rangers, and the live rangers point their guns at First Woman and Ahdamn.
>
> Just a minute, says First Woman, and that one takes some black cloth out of her purse. She cuts some holes in that black cloth. She puts that black cloth around her head.

> Look, look, all the live rangers says, and they point their fingers at First Woman. It's the Lone Ranger. Yes, they says, it is the Lone Ranger.
>
> That's me, says First Woman. (58)

In these episodes, King employs First Woman to humorous subversive measures by having her assume successfully the ironic identity of a legendary TV cowboy, thus showing how ridiculous the cultural signifiers assigned to Aboriginals (as "the enemy") and to Whites (as the "good guys") are. In doing so, he underscores the extent to which recent generations of North Americans have been and continue to be instructed by visual media to be able to identify the Imaginary Indian or his Foes/White heroes. With these issues in mind, I will now address the novel's perspective on the Imaginary Indian as portrayed in visual media, particularly the Hollywood cinema.

The Imaginary Indian (is Captured) in Hollywood

The questions of racial biological signifiers and Indianness emerge most definitively in the story of Portland Looking Bear's migration to Hollywood. Portland's initial success in the movie business is correlated to the alterations he makes to his person in order to fit the Hollywood concept of the Indian. First, at the recommendation of a fellow actor, he decides to change his name to "something more dramatic" (127). While this practice is commonplace amongst actors, for him, "dramatic" translates into "ethnic." His new sobriquet, Iron Eyes Screeching Eagle, as a racial marker serves as an advantageous marketing tool. Despite the absurdity of his new name, before the year is out, Portland is playing chiefs (127).

The second major change pertains to his appearance:

> Portland's nose wasn't the right shape. As long as he [was] in the background, a part of the faceless mob of Indians falling off their ponies in the middle of rivers or hiding in box canyons or dying outside the walls of forts, things [were] okay. But now that he [was] center stage, playing chiefs and the occasional renegade, the nose [had become] a problem. (128-29)

This passage submits two warning signals about cinema's conceptualization of the Indian: first, that a "right" shape exists for the Aboriginal nose and, by implication, other features; and second, that Portland's features are acceptable so long as he is part of the masses, but if he is to be the cinematic *representative* of Indians, then they warrant reconstruction. The Hollywood solution to the dilemma of Portland's imperfect look is, of course, to subject him to further mortification: a director issues the ultimatum that he must wear a rubber nose, despite Portland's protest that the only professional performers he knows of who wear rubber noses are clowns (129).

His eventual decision to don the fake nose, supported by fellow actors who swear it makes him "look even more Indian" (130),[18] ironically leads to his demise as an actor. His prosthesis denotes him as an Indian in real life, but it looks bizarre on film, overwhelming him logistically as an actor: it distorts his voice, and "[u]nder the lights, in front of the cameras, it seemed to grow and expand, to dominate Portland's face" (130). Thus, the very racial appendage that filmmakers advocated--demanded--to make him the perfect Imaginary Indian overpowers his screen image to the point where he as an actor becomes ineffectual. Portland's situation is an extreme case in which his attempt to *become* wholly the biological signification of his race, to

make his entire body the Imaginary Indian, results in the signifier's elimination of him.

The Hollywood film industry's strict adherence to their concept of the Indian induces further restrictions on the identity of the Aboriginal as both character and actor. Portland is limited to playing only Indians; the roles of hero, lawyer, policeman or cowboy are unavailable to him (127). Even at Remmington's, the steak house where he and Charlie secure "acting" jobs, he is still assigned the marginalized Other role: "'The cowboys work inside,' Portland [tells his son] as Charlie squeeze[s] into the flesh-colored tights. 'It's the Indians who park the cars'" (174). Furthermore, despite the fact that he is Aboriginal, he must also restrain his artistic impulses to conform to stereotypical Indian comportment. "Nobody played an Indian like Portland," C.B. Cologne tells Charlie. "I mean, he is Indian, but that's different. Just because you are an Indian doesn't mean that you can act like an Indian for the movies" (155). At Remmington's, Portland similarly advises Charlie to grunt, because "the idiots love it", and he will garner better tips (174).

The cinematic Imaginary Indian, as a creation fostered by a capitalist and technology-based industry, reflects those ideologies in its singularity of image and gesture. As an embodiment of *The* Indian, it transcends all ethnic diversity of reality. Determinants of ethnic identity such as language, religion, ritual, and geography are erased in favour of racial homogenization. In his one successful year, Portland plays "a Sioux eighteen times, a Cheyenne ten times, a Kiowa six times, an Apache five times, and a Navaho once" (127). The oneness of the Indian also has bearing on

mannerisms. An immutable, rigid stereotype, it can be performed by any actor, regardless of his or her ethnic background:

> Sally Jo Weyha, Frankie Drake, Polly Hantos, Sammy Hearne, Johnny Cabot, Henry Cortez, C. B. Cologne, Barry Zannos, friends and rivals, a tight community of Mexicans, Italians, Greeks, along with a few Indians, some Asians, and whites, all waiting in the shadows of the major studios, working as extras, fighting for bit parts in Westerns, playing Indians again and again and again. (153)

In the western movie, the actor is simply a variable; whoever best fits the formula of the Imaginary Indian, wins the role.

By erasing the ethnic spectrum of the Aboriginal race, Hollywood films offer a monolithic racial identity designated as "Them" to play against the cultural-hegemonic "Us" in their reductive versions of historical (and fictional) conflicts between the First Nations and white settlers. A senior British colonial official once stated that assimilation was the "euthanasia of savage communities" (Francis 199); I would add that as agents of colonization, mass media such as commercial film, given its predilection for homogeneity, singularity, and oversimplification, similarly anaesthetize Euro-North Americans to forget the ethnic groups annihilated in the process of settlement. Bill Bursum's enthusiasm for westerns and for John Wayne as the quintessential frontier hero is testament to the success of the film industry's strategy (183). Regarding the settlement of the western frontier, once again, the end justifies the means. The rest--the peoples massacred--is details.

"Assimilation," writes Daniel Francis, "was a policy intended to preserve Indians as individuals by destroying them as a people" (201). Although he is not referring to media, certainly his statement bears relevance to the discussion on it, in

that Hollywood mythmakers have preserved not a group of Aboriginals but One Indian, the Imaginary Indian, and have swept aside all others (Others?) figuratively and literally to keep their solitary figure intact.

Television has been instrumental in the operations of colonization, the promotion of the Imaginary Indian, and the expunction of ethnic identities. One of the few seemingly democratic technologies, a T.V. is present in virtually every North American household; yet, as Jerry Mander points out, television's communality is a pre-determined façade:

> By its ability to implant identical images into the minds of millions of people, TV can homogenize perspectives, knowledge, tastes, and desires, [I would add thought, behaviour, and culture] to make them resemble the tastes and interests of the people who transmit the imagery. In our world, the transmitters of the images are corporations whose ideal of life is technologically oriented, commodity oriented, materialistic, and hostile to nature. (97)

Where Aboriginals are concerned, television's capability to render the colonizer's ideology all-pervasive makes television the ultra-colonizer, an agent more efficient than residential schools, because its imperative allows for transmission only; feedback is extraneous. Mander has outlined in his book the devastating impact of television's new presence in the Dene and Inuit communities.[19] A Dene woman stated about the influence of American shows being broadcast to the region:

> 'You're being colonized by that, except that it's happening right in your heads. First it was the British, then it was the Canadians, then it was the oil companies, and now it's the TV'....'Nobody every told us that all this would be coming in with television. It's like some kind of invasion from outer space or something.' (114-15, 105)

Television's autocratic programming denies Aboriginals (and other viewers) control not only over the barrage of culturally-oppositional images broadcast to them, but more important, over the images *of themselves* and their cultures that are being transmitted globally.

Certainly, within the novel we see the negative effect that television has upon the Aboriginal characters. Perhaps the most moving episode is that of the isolated characters each reacting to the western movie, "The Mysterious Warrior", as it is being shown on TV. Alberta refuses outright to watch it--"Enough. The last thing in the world she needed to do was to watch some stupid Western. Teaching Western history was trial enough without having to watch what the movie makers had made out of it" (178)-- yet, it has already intruded upon her mind: she imagines Charlie and Lionel galloping around on horses in their suits (178). Latisha has forced upon her the unpleasant task of explaining the genre to her son Christian:

> "Mom, is this the one where the calvary comes over the hill and kills the Indians?"
> "Probably."
> "How come the Indians always get killed?
> "It's just a movie."
> "But what if they won?"
> "Well," Latisha said, watching her son rub his dirty socks up and down the wall, "if the Indians won, it probably wouldn't be a Western." (161)

The most poignant response is that of Charlie Looking Bear, for whom the cliché romantic plot underscores his solitariness, making him feel "terribly lonely. The kind of loneliness that he [hasn't] felt for a long time. Not since his mother died. Not since he and his father had gone to Los Angeles to try to outdistance her death"

(172). Furthermore, it evokes memories of his father's more degrading ethnic acting jobs (175-77), and culminates in his abashed recognition of his father, rubber nose intact, as the movie's chief (181).

These scenes illustrate television's pervasive, demoralizing ability, its imperative to invade relentlessly the sanctuary of home and the mind in order to remind its viewers of the indigene's place, designated by its makers. Despite the insidiousness of these images, the Aboriginal characters are compelled to watch, likely for two reasons. First, visual media offer the only representation of Indians, thus offering verification of a presence, albeit a dubious one. Second, and more significant, although such repulsive fabrications prevail, the Aboriginals remain hopeful--as Eli does with his interest in westerns--that "this one might be different" (166); that the next depiction will shatter the stereotypes. As part of the machinery of the white supremacist construction of history, mass media's representations of Aboriginals affect negatively both the self-worth of the First Nations peoples and society's perception of their worth. bell hooks has observed that,

> [d]uring the heyday of westerns of U.S. television, anyone watching saw spectacle after spectacle of white men destroying hundreds of Native Americans. No psychoanalytic studies have been done exploring the psychological impact on individuals (especially Native Americans) who have suffered holocaust and genocidal attack only to live in a culture where the major medium of mass communication reenacts this tragedy for "entertainment." Yet this has always been the case with Native Americans. When westerns were regularly shown on television, one could daily witness the slaughter of nations by white people.[20]

In essence, Aboriginals have become fodder for the dominant society's diversion. Given that racialized genocidal assault in more insidious forms persists today, its

impact is usually generational. The old Indians' revised ending to "The Mysterious Warrior" provides an understandably tremendous catharsis for Charlie, long overdue:

> John Wayne looked down and stared stupidly at the arrow in his thigh, shaking his head in amazement and disbelief as two bullets ripped through his chest and out the back of his jacket. Richard Widmark collapsed facedown in the sand, his hands clutching at an arrow buried in his throat.
>
> "Jesus!" said Bursum, and he stabbed the remote even harder.
>
> Charlie had his hands out of his pockets, his fists clenched, keeping time to the singing. His lips were pulled back from his teeth, and his eyes flashed as he watched his father flow through the soldiers like a flood.
>
> "Get'em, Dad," he hissed. (267)

His enjoyment of witnessing his father finally exact revenge for the many deaths he has died for entertainment reveals the cumulative effect of his mental suffering. bell hooks remarks: "No one speaks of how the pain that our ancestors endured is carried in our hearts and psyches, shaping our contemporary worldview and social behavior."[21] The visual media's persistent exhibition of the static image of the Indian ensures the continuation of this traumatizing colonization.

Simple resistance to these manoeuvres is, of course, readily available to Aboriginals: the prerogative is theirs to turn off the TV. Alberta does so immediately, and just before the massacre scene, Latisha likewise takes affirmative action when Christian asks, "Is it over, Mom?" (179). Such acts of defiance/self-preservation, though positive, are ineffectual; they merely alleviate the symptom rather than dislodge the cause. They do not stop the broadcasting of these images, nor do they alter the image of the Indian itself. Until both of these endeavours are achieved, Aboriginals will continue to fight the image, to fit themselves into the

image, or to deny the image--become "apples" (as a boy, Lionel wanted to be John Wayne, the hero "who saved stagecoaches and wagon trains from Indian attacks" [202]),[22] and non-Aboriginals will continue to impose the Imaginary Indian mould upon them.

The tension between Aboriginals, non-Aboriginals, and the Imaginary Indian instigated by visual media inevitably translates into a polemic over who and what constitutes a "real Indian" in real life. Several times in the novel, white characters inform the Aboriginals that they are not real Indians because their corporeal lives are lived differently from those of their ancestors. In other words, their contemporary lifestyle does not coincide with that of the Imaginary Indian--a notion that Sifton corroborates for Eli: "[Y]ou guys aren't real Indians anyway. I mean, you drive cars, watch television, go to hockey games. Look at you. You're a university professor....Latisha runs a restaurant and Lionel sells televisions. Not exactly traditionalists, are they?" (119). For him, the real Aboriginal life does not include modern technologies of any sort. In accordance with the white fixed representation of the Indian and the equating of tradition with antiquity, the idea of cultural traditions merging with technological advancements is incongruous.

Yet, the contemporary Aboriginal characters do merge them successfully, by restricting technology to a personal sphere. They do not elevate it to a dominating position or to a godlike status. Ironically, their position, the binary opposite of North Americans, works to their advantage: their awareness of the obstinate rigidity of both the Imaginary Indian *and* technology empowers them with the ability to unite and

exploit both. In doing so, they exist between these defined spaces outlined by non-Aboriginals, sometimes occupying such spaces when convenient, but not long enough to be arrested therein, to be denied self-definition. Chela Sandoval asserts that oppressed groups often conceive identity as mobile and manipulatable: "subjugated citizens can either occupy or throw off subjectivities in a process that at once both enacts and yet de-colonizes their various relations to their real conditions of existence."[23]

In King's novel, this cultural and ethnic fluidity is central to changing the image of the Indian. King implies that reconceptualization power is inherent in the potency of multi-perspectived storytelling. Each additional viewpoint propels the Aboriginal's story continuously, thereby denying it singular author-ity and also a pinpoint center from which non-Aboriginals can objectify it. In the following section, I will discuss this issue, and integrate it with my original premise that a pivotal concern of the text is the survival of the First Nations and the land.

Multi-voiced narrative and the AlterNative[24]

COYOTE LEARNS TO WHISTLE[25] - *Thomas King*

Coyote tied Weasel's tail in a KNOT.
And when Weasel found that tail, she
knew who did
THAT.

But she says NOTHING.
She WHISTLED.
And Coyote came over to see what all that
WHISTLING
was about.

Your TAIL is tied in a knot
Coyote says this to Weasel.

Yes, says Weasel. It helps me to
WHISTLE.

Well, says Coyote, I can SEE that
It does.
And he tied his tail in a knot
and BLEW air out of his mouth.

But it SOUNDED like a fart.

You got to pull that KNOT tighter
says Weasel.
So Coyote did that and tried again.

JUST farting.

Pull it tighter, says Weasel.
so, Coyote thanked Weasel, gave her some
tobacco for the ADVICE
and pulled the knot so tight that HIS
tail BROKE and fell off.

Elwood told that STORY to the Rotary Club
in town
and everyone laughed and says what
a STUPID Coyote.

And that's the problem, you know,
seeing the DIFFERENCE between stupidity
and greed.

In the long-standing struggle for survival, Aboriginals have resisted the domination and rapacity enacted against them and the environment by Westerners. Over the centuries, this continent's indigenous groups have underscored the necessity of parity with regards to the surroundings, and also the expansive repercussions that

would diminish the existence of all if any one group disrupted that balance. Only today, after the land's existence has reached a critical stage, are Euro-North Americans now giving credence to the Aboriginal opinion. Two major reasons resound as to this prolonged slight: 1) Europeans considered themselves the epitome of civilization; 2) they believed Aboriginals were not, due not only to religious reasons, but primarily to the absence of written languages. Consequently, in written form, the Aboriginal--AlterNative--perspective has long been denied a presence. Even today, perhaps the biggest arena of contention in the relations between the First Nations and the Europeans and their descendants is that of narrative authority. As I mentioned earlier, many Europeans tend to perceive the written word as definitive and authoritative. Historically, this conviction has privileged their standpoint in terms of the validity and legitimacy accorded to treaties, in contrast with the disregard conferred to wampum belts. Not surprising, then, is the manifestation of this outlook by the European literary characters who appear in the novel.

> *In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth.* And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep--
>
> - Lone Ranger, Green Grass, Running Water (10)

In each of the narratives in which one of the four Aboriginal Women encounters such characters, written literature is foregrounded. First Woman refuses to let the soldiers impose upon her rather feeble companion, Ahdamn, a name from James Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking tales (58), and other white male characters attempt to ascribe to the other Women names from books or lists. When Changing

Woman meets Ahab and Ishmael from Moby Dick, her identity confuses Ishmael because it isn't in his book, which he is following as a script for their particular story. He refuses to "share" his name and offers her Queequeg instead, which she accepts momentarily until her arrest, when she assumes Ishmael's name (162-3, 188). This instalment implies that the written word is rigid and unyielding.

Thought Woman's engagements underscore these traits more conspicuously. In a disruption of texts which include the New Testament, she first meets A.A. (ArchAngel and C.S.I.S. agent) Gabriel, who does not even bother to debate the question of her identity; he simply ignores her answers and designates her Mary, virgin mother, and evil woman on his forms (226-27). She then meets Robinson Crusoe, the famous shipwrecked writer of lists (not novels), who promptly calls her Friday, and rebukes her for stubbornly refusing this name (245-6). And Old Woman's rendezvous with Young Man Walking On Water certainly leaves one questioning not only the gospels for their accuracy--Young Man is the only one allowed to be in two places at once--but the very nature of Christian miracles as well. Coyote opens up space for scepticism regarding the latter; he enthusiastically suggests several Christian signifiers as possible elements of her story, such as a burning bush or a pillar of salt, only to be chided by the first person narrator for such fantastic ideas: "'Where do you get these things?' I says. 'I read a book,' says Coyote. 'Forget the book,' I says. 'We've got a story to tell'" (290-1). Old Woman's subsequent encounter with Nasty Bumppo results in his consulting a book to name her

Hawkeye, a pseudonym which lands her in trouble with soldiers, whose list says the name is that of a white man impersonator (329-30).

These episodes, especially the one involving Coyote, openly challenge the absolute author-ity of the Western, patriarchal written word over the oral, regarding human history. Western literature and culture emphasize and champion individualism, solitary achievements--in other words, advocate oneness. The exchange between Old Woman and Young Man illustrates the fundamental sedimentation of this cultural tenet in religion. Old Woman's attempt to assist Young Man in finding the appellation for his followers prompts him to respond,

> You must be new around here. [...] You don't seem to know the rules.
>
> What rules? says Old Woman. [...]
>
> Christian rules, says Young Man Walking On Water. And the first rule is that no one can help me. The second rule is that no one can tell me anything. (291)

Christian rules, formulated from a dogma embodying a patriarchal order, dictate as well that he steal credit for "miracles" performed by a woman who sings songs to waves (293).

Each of the names of the white male literary characters is an icon for solitary achievement: Noah, Crusoe, the Lone Ranger, Hawkeye, Natty Bumppo, Ishmael, Ahab, Jesus, and God. What the collective presence of the Aboriginal Women provides is an alternative, more comprehensive, version of the men's stories. Furthermore, they undermine the authority of the written stories themselves by introducing alternative plot devices, facts, etc. that are not included in the written versions. Young Man/Jesus' hogging of the limelight is one such event/detail; so is

the mysterious killing of Nasty Bumppo (329), the realistic description of Noah's canoe as having been full of poop (122), the portrait of Noah as a pervert, and Changing Woman's sighting of Moby-Jane, the Great Black Whale, who is known to readers as Moby-Dick, great white whale (164). In this last episode, Coyote assumes the posture of the general reader:

> "She means Moby-Dick," says Coyote. "I read the book. It's Moby-Dick, the great white whale who destroys the 'Pequod.'"
>
> "You haven't been reading your history," I tell Coyote. "It's English colonists who destroy the Pequots."
>
> "But there isn't a Moby-Jane."
>
> "Sure there is," I says. "Just look out over there. What do you see?"
>
> "Well...I'll be," says Coyote. (164)

These additional features imply that some of them might be true, and some might not, thus questioning the amount of disclosure of and in the stories. The fact is, the singular subjectivity of these literary works leaves tremendous gaps and imparts unreliability upon the narrative and narrator, leaving us wondering what has been omitted, left unsaid, or changed outright. The word play on Pequod/Pequots suggests that to become preoccupied solely with a singular viewpoint and version of events, particularly those of a historical nature, is not only facile, but also encouraged, since the sole standpoint is often pre-determined by those in a position of dominance.

The four stories of the Aboriginal Women present an indigenous (re-)consideration of the White stories; in addition, they offer alternative representations of Aboriginals, or AlterNatives, as well as of (mythic) white figures to the readers. More important, the fusing of the Aboriginal stories with the Western ones reconceptualizes the discrete spaces that segregate the white reader as subject

relative to both the narratives and the aboriginal Other. By putting the characters in the same space and letting them interact, King calls into question the author-ity of the colonizer to render colonized subjects as spectacle. The altering of the white stories is indicative of a loss of authorial control for both white characters and especially readers over their own culture's literary products. Without the benefits of divisions between them and the (Imaginary) Other, white readers are rendered powerless to dispute the Women's disproving perceptions of white attitudes, behaviour, and ideology--that white men are bad-mannered, have a murderous inclination (in the Christian world, they only kill things that are useful or that they don't like [163]), and act as if they have no relations. The four Women's ironic subversive assumption of the white characters' names completes the collapse of discrete space into what post-modernist theorist Jean Baudrillard describes as "the loss of space as an ordering principle", resulting in "gigantic spaces of circulation, ventilation and ephemeral connections."[26] The white identity as colonizer-spectator, which derives its contours in relation to the Aboriginal identity as colonized Other, is compromised. This derangement of identity signifies not only the actual, though often concealed, provisionality of identity, but also the necessity of multiple, often oppositional perspectives in demolishing ethnic identity constructs. Thus, when the narrator admonishes Coyote, "You haven't been reading *your* history" (italics mine), he seems to have this imperative in mind.

The need for a story's inclusion of diverse perspectives (in order to be complete) by no means indicates that with their attendance, the story will then be

authoritative and definitive. What it will be is holistic--a complete circle. To expand on Baudrillard's model of post-modernism, details will circulate freely within this narrative circle, and the different vantage points will be connected by a diaphanous membraneous circumference that enables the story to breathe, so to speak, to admit new elements from the outside realm, yet, to retain its original configuration.

Aboriginal stories of the oral story-telling tradition demonstrate this fluidity and transformativity; they change with the needs of the storyteller, varying with occasion, season, audience, and function. Similar to the concept of continuity introduced at the beginning of this chapter, Aboriginal oral literature emphasizes the sharing of stories to ensure that a narrative remains free of closure imposed by an obstinate raconteur, and continues to flow to the next generation of listeners. Several examples of this malleability pervade the various plots of the novel. One manifestation is King's merging of the historical past with present modernity. He incorporates appliances, modern food, and other fixtures of contemporary reality with traditional narratives from the outset; for example, to assuage the increasingly excited, newly-created GOD, Coyote suggests that he watch some television (2). In addition, each of the Creation accounts features such contrivances: in First Woman's story, Old Coyote floats by on an air mattress (32), and Ahdamn misnames the creatures of the garden after modern items (33); Changing Woman's story involves a canoe (122), weapons, and appliances (163); Thought Woman's features business cards and briefcases (225-26); and Old Woman's includes references to factotums, civil servants and stockholders (291). By incorporating contrivances from modern

life, the stories forge a connection to the present,[27] and thus heed the Aboriginal oral tradition, which connotes that the past is the present and vice-versa.

King reinforces this concept by subverting the chronology of human history, according to Western versions. The Aboriginal Creation accounts deliberately evoke this tension. First Woman's life pointedly does not begin in a garden (32), a direct challenge to the Christian account of time's beginning, which Ishmael says "comes later" (10). That GOD himself here is a contrary dream of Coyote's decisively deflates his omnipotence. More significant, First Woman's story is paradoxical in that she is not the first human, or even the first Aboriginal; she and Ahdamn encounter rangers (58) and other Indians at Fort Marion (82). This paradigm of incongruity is integrated into all of the four stories, in which the Women meet not only historical (and perhaps also literary) religious figures, but also literary and media figures. Popular heroes, legendary figures, and mythical constructs such as the Lone Ranger, Tonto, and the Imaginary Indian precede the stories. Thus, King seems to favour a non-linear conception of time and history. In addition, by retelling the Creation account not once but four times, all presented with equal stature, he is suggesting that collectively they likely offer more sense than any one alone, since they form a matrix of possible combinations of details.

Another example of fluidity is the self-reflexivity and the intersecting of the narratives. Both devices work to conflate the discrete spaces of logic-defying reality and mimetic realism. This transparent fluidity perplexed a few of the novel's reviewers most;[28] English instructor Candace Fertile even admitted that she "didn't

know what was happening."[29] It also prompted a couple of them to apply the label, "magic.realism."[30] King's approach to story-telling in this novel, called "associational", to use his own term,[31] actively fuses the tradition style of oral story-telling with contemporary formats. The conventional qualities he has borrowed include repetition, references to physical gesture, and most significant, a deliberate omission of precise facts.[32] The latter is in stark contrast with the Western preoccupation with exhaustive explanations, the obsession with minute details. King intentionally leaves some parts of the narratives unexplained, such as the cars' disappearance, and the sudden dis/appearance of people and things, and durations of time (the Women's floating). He offers justification for these calculated gaps in the Lone Ranger's narration of First Woman's story, at Ahdamn's sudden appearance: "First Woman's garden. That good woman makes a garden and she lives there with Ahdamn. I don't know where he comes from. Things like that happen, you know" (33). Furthermore, Coyote often assumes the standpoint of the Western reader, asking for concretizing details such as "How long is Thought Woman going to float around this time?" (246), demanding explanations, "Where did a canoe come from?" (89), and illuminations, "Who shot Nasty Bumppo?" (329), whereas the narrator remains indifferent, responding with "Who knows?" (246) or "Who cares?" (329), and telling Coyote to use his imagination (89). He is unperturbed by the indeterminacies of life, such as two earthquakes in one story: "[Y]ou never know when something like this is going to happen again" (350). The complexities of the

function of the first-person narrator and Coyote will be made more apparent further in this essay.

The metafictional elements of the novel are another traditional aspect of Aboriginal story-telling in that they overtly acknowledge the presence of an audience. King offers a myriad of such incidents that range in importance. Some obvious instances include: the narrator's direct acknowledgement of an audience ("I wasn't talking to you," he tells Coyote; "Who else is here?" asks Coyote [326]); Robinson Crusoe's inadvertent repeating of the story's opening, previously done on page eleven (196); and Coyote's telephoning the first-person narrator from a different storyline--which also implies the intriguing idea of multi-media metafiction, and humorously, too, for the narrator's line is busy (250). Such tactics can be interpreted as post-modern playfulness, but I consider them merely typical manifestations of humour found in Aboriginal stories, humour being conceived of as an integral force to maintaining one's personal sense of mental, physical, and spiritual balance.

Other metafictional components, such as the intersecting of the various plotlines and characters, prove more complex because not only do these cross-overs also blur the division between fiction and reality, they also do so collectively. The novel contains an intriguing chain of action and reaction occurring between the narrators (I include Coyote here) and the characters within the various storylines. Coyote moves back and forth between the mythic/fantasy and the realistic narratives, and the Lone Ranger's group expresses awareness of his movements. At one point, they abstain from continuing with their own story until he returns because they feel

better knowing where he is (297). Furthermore, not only can Coyote disrupt the narratives, but his intrusions are recognized by the more mundane characters. When he introduces soldiers to Thought Woman's story and adds flowers to their hair as a gesture of balance, the soldiers immediately demand of Thought Woman if she is the person responsible for the flowers (270), thus demonstrating an unexpected consciousness. Since the characters acknowledge Coyote, and they and the narrator acknowledge us as audience to their tales, we are situated both inside and outside the novel, seemingly straddling its transparent periphery that separates it from reality.

The absence of distinct space as an ordering principle which has confused the aforementioned reviewers does likewise to Dr. Joe Hovaugh/GOD. In terms of physical space he prefers his neat little garden to the Canadian landscape: "Things in Canada [seem] slightly wild, more out of hand, disorderly, even chaotic. There [is] an openness to the sky and a wideness to the land that [makes] him uncomfortable" (260). That he associates the old Indians with the land when his car disappears (288) suggests that the mystery surrounding the disappearance of both has unsettled his sense of imaginary space. His determination to locate the Indian physically is related to his desire to do so symbolically. He creates sense of the Indians' escapes for himself by plotting "occurrences, probabilities, directions, deviations" on graph paper (39), and analysing "literal, allegorical, tropological, anagogic" elements on charts (324). Though in this case he is able to predict where he will find the old Indians, the why and how of their disappearance yet elude him. Moreover, his obsession with facts, symbolized by his book in which he records and cross-references the

disappearances, compels him to rule out alternative possibilities and views pertaining to the escapes.[33] His singular vision has detected solely a pattern of imminent disaster, which leaves gaps in his data that Dr. John Eliot calls into question: "'Maybe nothing happened on those [other] dates. Or maybe something good happened on those dates. You ever think of that?'" (39).

King is thus suggesting that the singular viewpoint should be received with caution because by itself (as Dr. Joe Hovaugh/GOD and Jesus similarly attempt with it), it moves towards fixing and controlling everything. Multiple subjectivities, including those of the story's audience, are necessary for (re-)establishing holistic spatial dimensions that can circumvent the mistake of interpreting a single perspective as representative of anything more than tangible reality. "There are no truths," the narrator tells Coyote. "Only stories" (326). At the outset of the novel, the three other Indians also remind the Lone Ranger, "You can't tell [the story] by yourself" because it is best not to make mistakes with stories (10), therefore insinuating that to attempt to do so would result in one. The assumption of authorship would directly contradict the story's communal source.

The story of the human race, King implies, should not be fragmented and made subject to hierarchical classification. Just as the narrator and Coyote regard the Aboriginal Creation accounts as the same story (275), so, too, do they relate the Christian tradition with the Aboriginal. When Coyote asks if the rules are made by "that contrary dream from the garden story", the narrator responds "It's all the same story" (125). King also illustrates the cyclical coalescence of all stories in the novel's

narrative structure. Not only does the novel end where it began, but also the chapter that introduces the plot twist of the escape of the old Indians (12-13) is reproduced virtually word for word to recount their return (355-56). The expansive, encompassing conceptualization of the affiliation between the distinct racial and ethnic groups is made more overt in the novel's portrayal of relations between the various Aboriginal characters despite the differences within their group. Gauging the characters against, and their responses to, the Imaginary Indian will demonstrate this diversity amongst themselves.

King resists the image of the Imaginary Indian by presenting a spectrum of Aboriginal characters. Lionel and Eli are situated at the "white" end, for their desire--former for Eli--to undergo a bleaching process and become apples. We also learn of the consequences of this decision through Eli's story. In a moment of self-reflection, Eli juxtaposes the cliché of the "Indian who couldn't go home" with the painful lived experience, which is not the slightest bit romantic (239). Victims of all sorts are included as well: Latisha had an abusive husband; Alberta's mother, Ada, had an alcoholic husband; and Alberta's father, Amos, a slave to the bottle, succumbed also to an ineffable oppressive psychic burden (73). Although some of these lives corroborate stereotypical depictions of the modern Aboriginal existence, most of the characters overcame their obstacles, and the reader must recognize that these characters do not represent the majority in the novel.

In fact, others blatantly defy, even exploit, the image of the Indian. Alberta is (and Eli was) a university professor, thus dispelling the Western myth of being

racially the intellectual inferiors to whites. Charlie allows himself to be hired as the token Aboriginal lawyer for Duplessis International Associates, the company overseeing the dam (99). Latisha, however, provides the funniest example of the way Aboriginals capitalize on the myths and stereotypes with her Dead Dog Café. In this tourist trap that purports to serve dog meat, the "traditional meal" of the Blackfoot (her adamantly traditional Aunt Norma's idea), Latisha exploits the non-Aboriginals' notion of "historical" Indian existence. The so-called evidence of this life she fabricates using the medium many tourists would deem irrefutable: photographs, taken by Will Horse Capture of Medicine River, of Indians hunting dogs of various breeds (92). Latisha thus invokes a double irony by manipulating a technology that seemingly fixes a moment in time to reinforce an equally rigid image. Deemed a "real Indian restaurant" by Norma (47), the restaurant might also be construed as embodying the resisting strategy of exclusion through false inclusion. Set up to cater to the antiquated expectations of tourists--the menus and postcards are popular souvenirs--the Dead Dog Café thus diverts the prying eyes of the tourists/outsiders from the actual Blackfoot culture to an enclosed space in which the Aboriginals control what and how much of their culture is seen. On this type of subversive strategy, Chela Sandoval has elucidated, "The differential mode of oppositional consciousness depends upon an ability to read the current situation of power and self-consciously choosing and adopting the ideological form best suited to push against its configurations."[34] Latisha's cultural exploitation thus serves a communal purpose, a

motive that distinguishes her from Charlie. Furthermore, she creates a balance by giving back to the community: she prepares food for the Sun Dance every year.

Nevertheless, however they manoeuvre the boundaries of the Imaginary Indian, be it through self-awareness or affirmative, culture-preserving action, the characters themselves are proof to its constructiveness. Having existed within, between and around the spaces organized for ethnicity by Euro-Americans, these resisting characters are able to exploit the knowledge they have gained in those interstices. Furthermore, they are empowered as subjects who can occasionally take the construction of ethnicity into their own hands and out of those of non-Aboriginals in order to represent alternatives, or rather, AlterNatives.

I have already touched upon the subversiveness manifested by the four Aboriginal Women within their Creation narratives in relation to the Imaginary Indian. In the realistic plotline, however, they cause just as much confusion amongst the characters (and reviewers). In addition to their regular disappearances, the flux of their biological sex has left many perplexed; Dr. Joe Hovaugh has them documented as male, Babo knows them as female, and when he meet them, Charlie cannot make any distinction--he initially thinks they may be old actors, C.B. Cologne or Polly Hantos, but decides they must be local:

> Of course, the old Indians couldn't be from Hollywood. Now that he thought about it, it made better sense that they were probably from the reserve, were friends of the family, perhaps even relatives. Uncle Wally from Browning. Auntie Ruth from Brocket. Something like that. (212)

King augments this mystery by assigning a specific sex to the Indians only twice. As AlterNatives, they slide--or dance, if you will, the way Coyote does from story to story--between the oppositional categories of male/female, young/ancient, mortal/immortal, and human/supernatural being, never being exclusively one or the other.

Yet, despite their sophisticated transformative ability, they retain their personal cohesion through connection to their culture and people. They escape from the hospital whenever some part of the world urgently needs fixing up, or more precisely, when the survival of the land or Aboriginals is in peril. The principle reason for caring for the life around us informs their presence in the contemporary story; as they tell Lionel, their current benefactor, "Everybody's related, grandson" (248).

The final but quintessential AlterNatives, the narrator and Coyote, also have this agenda and guiding principle in mind. Similar to Latisha, their brand of assistance assumes the form of disorienting the non-Aboriginal audience as much as possible in their presentation of the various narratives. They systematically destro the integrity of defined literary spaces pertaining to the act of story-telling. In addition to the metafictive elements mentioned above--characters' responding to the narration (58, 270), Coyote's crossing storylines, and time paradoxes etc.--is the complex involvement of Coyote and the narrator with the act of story-telling itself. They *hear* the story ("We can't hear what's happening if you keep talking," the narrator tells Coyote [163]; also [191]); *see* the action unfolding (the narrator tells Coyote to "Watch that sky. Watch that water. Pretty soon we can watch [Changing

Woman] fall" [89]; other witnessings on [163, 164, 227, 244, 349]); *travel* with the characters to keep abreast of the action (Coyotes suggests perhaps Dr. Joe Hovaugh will give them a ride [198]); and *manipulate* or interfere with the story (Coyote spreads panic by warning about Moby-Jane [164]; also [269, 340]). Yet, their control is called into question with regards to Coyote's presence. He appears physically to the contemporary characters only three times (199-200, 233, 241), otherwise he is invisible to them (Lionel's party in Bursum's store is a good example.) In addition, Old Coyote is mistaken for a snake (227). This fluidity in visibility/invisibility suggests that Coyote has the capability to move from readily-comprehensible spaces to something unintelligible. The narrator, too, would seem to have this ability, for if each of the four Women/old Indians tells their own Creation story, then who is the overall narrator? King has thus implemented the "authorless" notion of oral literature, electing to have his characters merely convey the storylines.

King's subversive method of narrative construction--intermingling these elements often within the same storyline, creating questions or mysteries--baffled many reviewers.[35] The collapse of discrete spaces and the blurring of lines pertaining to the Aboriginal culture and image has created an unanticipated instantaneity and simultaneity of things. I would argue that King is suggesting that life is like that, replete with so-called "post-modern" elements and happenings. Karen Shimakawa confirms this idea:

> For those marginalized subjects not fortunate enough to occupy [the] position of author-ity, who have necessarily adapted themselves within, between and around the spaces shaped by others, this event called "post-modernism" merely describes lived experience.[36]

Eli's mother recounts family chronicles as stories: she tells them slowly, repeating parts as she goes, resting at points so that nothing is lost or confused. And then she goes on (170). Aboriginals need to and must tell their own stories and life-narratives, if their histories are to be right. And the right way to tell the stories is to let them tell themselves. When the Lone Ranger's group begins the genesis story correctly, it continues to unfold by itself: "'Listen,' said Robinson Crusoe....'It is beginning,' said Ishmael....'It is begun well,' said the Lone Ranger" (11). The frequent interruptions by Coyote to inject details into the stories parallel the attempts by non-Aboriginals to solidify and fix Aboriginal stories and cultures. Like the river, the story needs to be free to run its own course without interruption if it is to endure.

Ethnic cultural traditions must also be unrestricted in their movement in order to flow from one generation to the next. In the novel, the Sun Dance serves as the site of the continuance and succession: Eli's brother-in-law Harley remarks, "Just like the old days....Only then, we were younger" (312), and Latisha observes that for as long as she can remember, "Norma's lodge was always in the same place on the east side of the camp. And before that Norma's mother. And before that" (307). On the subject of the necessity of this cultural inheritance, reviewer William J. Scheick comments:

> The hope King's book offers his culture resides in the perception of existence life as "running water," as an incessant flow of uncontainable possibilities. Even if Anglo-American culture seek to obstruct this orignative [sic] fluidity, to make adamantine its present version of reality through "power and control," in fact...reality is as unconfinable and as mutable as gushing water.[37]

The Sun Dance as a formidable space linking Aboriginal peoples and the land is foremost in Eli's memory: "It was much as it had always been. The camp. The land. The sky.[...] And each morning, because the sun returned and the people remembered, it would begin again" (302, 116).

The act of remembering--people, traditions, and the purposes for the existence of both--is the crux of King's consideration of the perseverance of Aboriginals and the land. Just as Norma establishes the pattern for inheritance of her family's cabin (354), thus simultaneously guaranteeing the endurance of the family's heritage, so, too, do the instantaneity and simultaneity of Aboriginal cultures (and literatures) similarly link the past with the present, and thus ensure their continuity into the future. I end this essay with the old Indians' characterization of the sunrise, which I consider appropriate also for the Aboriginal existence:

> "How beautiful it was," said the Lone Ranger.
> "Yes," said Ishmael. "How beautiful it is."
> "It is ever changing," said Robinson Crusoe.
> "It remains the same," said Hawkeye. (297)

ENDNOTES

[1] Sandra Martin, "This Land is Whose Land?" rev. of Green Grass, Running Water, by Thomas King, Quill & Quire May 1994: 24.

[2] Jerry Mander, In the Absence of the Sacred: The Failure of Technology & the Survival of the Indian Nations (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1991) 6. Subsequent references are to this edition and page numbers will appear parenthetically in the text. I am indebted to Cree traditional teacher Joe Couture for recommending this book.

[3] See Harmut Lutz, "Thomas King," Contemporary Challenges: Conversations with Canadian Native Authors (Saskatoon: Fifth House Publishers, 1991) 116. King adds that, in contrast to Aboriginals, what North Americans have is "an ability to rise to a crisis."

[4] Vine Deloria, Jr., intro. to God is Red: A Native View of Religion, 2nd. ed. (Golden: Fulcrum Publishing, 1994) 2.

[5] Technological research is usually linked to the government, various élite institutes of higher learning, the corporate world, and the military. (Mander names several financial symbioses between corporations, academia and science that have been forged over this century and are being made stronger and more frequently today to enhance U.S. competitiveness in world markets [164].) Examples of autocratic advancements include dams, nuclear energy and biotechnology.

[6] Deloria, Jr., 156.

[7] Daphne Marlatt, qtd. in Linda Hutcheon, "'Circling the Downspout of Empire': Post-Colonial and Post-Modern Ironies," Splitting Images: Contemporary Canadian Ironies (Toronto: Oxford UP, 1991) 69.

[8] Thomas King, Green Grass, Running Water (Toronto: HarperCollins Publishers Ltd., 1993) 312. Subsequent references are to this edition and page numbers will appear parenthetically in the text.

[9] Ironically, Bursum prefers movies of romance, such as Westerns, to newer films centred around "weird machines and robots with rifles" (157), a predilection that suggests he is vaguely conscious of, and perhaps even misses, the human factor that technology usually eradicates.

[10] Robert Berkhofer Jr., qtd. in Daniel Francis, The Imaginary Indian: The Image of the Indian in Canadian Culture (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1992) 5.

[11] Francis, 221.

[12] Francis articulates that, historically, Canadian advertising has often exploited the image of the Indian in association with the land to evoke connotations of the latter's mystery, exoticism, and otherworldliness. See his chapter, "Marketing the Imaginary Indian", especially 187-89.

[13] Roper, qtd. in Francis, 181-82.

[14] On their first date, George Morningstar asked Latisha if she had been born on

the reserve; when she answered in the affirmative, he was pleased that she was "a real Indian" (112).

[15] Terry Goldie, Fear and Temptation: The Image of the Indigene in Canadian, Australian, and New Zealand Literatures (Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 1989) 168.

[16] Percy Walton, "'Tell Our Own Stories': Politics and the Fiction of Thomas King," World Literature Written in English 30.2 (1990) 81.

[17] These episodes also allude to the recent historical policy of renaming Aboriginals who were to be registered under The Indian Act.

[18] While watching the western on TV, Dr. Joe Hovaugh indicates his awareness of various ethnic actors having portrayed film Indians, yet perceives Portland's nose as "a dead giveaway" to his racial identity (185).

[19] Mander visited Yellowknife in 1984 as a guest speaker at a community workshop. See his chapter, "Television (2): Satellites and the Cloning of Cultures - The Case of the Dene Indians."

[20] bell hooks, Black Looks: race and representation (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1992) 186.

[21] hooks, 187.

[22] Lionel's response as a child is understandable since his other choice would have been to identify with either the villain or victim image of Indians. More incriminating

against television is the fact that it forced Aboriginals to oppose their racial allegiances if they wanted to be on the winning side of the battles between cowboys and Indians.

[23] Chela Sandoval, qtd. in Karen Shimakawa, "'Who's to Say?' Or, Making Space for Gender and Ethnicity in *M. Butterfly*," Theatre Journal 45.3 (October 1993): 358.

[24] As much as I would like to take credit for this cool term, I've actually borrowed it from a photo exhibit by contemporary Aboriginal photographers at the McMichael Art Gallery that was displayed in June. I read the title in a newspaper announcement.

[25] Thomas King, appended to Margaret Atwood, "A Double-Bladed Knife: Subversive Laughter in Two Stories by Thomas King," Canadian Literature 124-125 (Spring-Summer 1990) 250-1.

[26] Jean Baudrillard, qtd. in Shimakawa, 349-50.

[27] In Medicine River, Lionel James, the elderly story-teller of the community, similarly transforms an old story about Coyote into a contemporary one by incorporating details of the difficulties he experienced travelling abroad without a credit card (171-72).

[28] See Sarah Sheard, "King dazzles with a literary juggling act," rev. of Green Grass, Running Water, by Thomas King, Globe & Mail 27 Feb. 1993: C20; David Homel, "Humor shines through in mythic tale of Blackfoot," rev. of Green Grass, Running Water, by Thomas King, The Montreal Gazette 13 Mar. 1993: K3, K5; James McManus, "Has Red Dog Gone White?" rev. of Green Grass, Running Water, by

Thomas King, New York Times Book Review 25 July 1993: 21; Valerie Compton, rev. of Green Grass, Running Water, by Thomas King, Quill & Quire Mar. 1993: 46; and Diane Turbide, "A Literary Trickster," rev. of Green Grass, Running Water, by Thomas King, Maclean's 3 May 1993: 43, 45.

[29] Candace Fertile, "Novel works on many levels," rev. of Green Grass, Running Water, by Thomas King, Calgary Herald 6 Feb. 1993: A16.

[30] See Eric McCormack, "Coyote Goes Slapstick," rev. of Green Grass, Running Water, by Thomas King, Books in Canada Apr. 1993: 40-1; and John Blades, "Native Fiction 'Booming': Authors trying to bury old Hollywood image of Indians," rev. of Green Grass, Running Water, by Thomas King, Calgary Herald 30 Apr. 1993: G9.

[31] Thomas King, "Godzilla vs. Post-Colonial," World Literature Written in English 30.2 (1990) 14.

[32] See David Latham, "From Richardson to Robinson to King: Colonial Assimilation and Communal Origination," British Journal of Canadian Studies 8.2 (1993) 184.

[33] Joe Hovaugh first appears in nastier form in King's short story, "A Seat in the Garden," in which he draws a "battle plan" against an imaginary Indian and insists it can be read only one way.

[34] Chela Sandoval, qtd. in Shimakawa, 358.

[35] See Robert L. Berner, rev. of Green Grass, Running Water, by Thomas King, World Literature Today 67.4 Autumn 1993: 869; Lee Lemon, rev. of Green Grass, Running Water, by Thomas King, Prairie Schooner 68.2 Summer 1994: 158; Malcolm Jones, "Life Off the Reservation: A Cherokee writer as darkly funny as Twain," rev. of Green Grass, Running Water, by Thomas King, Newsweek 12 Apr. 1993: 60; McManus, Sheard, Homel, and Fertile.

[36] Shimakawa, 350.

[37] William J. Scheick, "Grace & Gall," rev. of Green Grass, Running Water, by Thomas King, Canadian Literature No. 138-39 Fall/Winter 1993: 155-56.