

THAT DAM WHALE: TRUTH, FICTION AND AUTHORITY IN KING AND  
MELVILLE.

by

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For Mom, Dad, and Jen.

Thanks for everything.

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the references Thomas King makes to Herman Melville's work in his novel Green Grass, Running Water. King refers to numerous other texts and historical moments throughout the book. However, his allusions to Melville are among the most prominent, and it is important to ask why King chooses to make them so. With these references to Moby-Dick, and "Benito Cereno" in particular, King is, in part, attempting to engage Melville in conversation. Although these two authors are worlds apart both temporally and culturally, they are similar in ways which bear exploration. What King does with his references to Melville in Green Grass, Running Water is the primary concern of this thesis.

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"That Dam Whale: Truth, Fiction and Authority in King and Melville."

Introduction

**Water, water everywhere and not a drop to drink.  
- Coleridge**

As Thomas King is still a comparatively new arrival on the literary scene, the body of criticism concerning his work is, although currently expanding, still fairly small. Thus, it is still within reach to present an overview of what can be found in the criticism regarding Green Grass, Running Water. One thing which appears to strike the majority of readers about this novel is that it is a very funny book. Whether critics address the humour directly or not, they tend to argue that there is definite intention behind King's playful style. Margaret Atwood notes that King's humorous scenarios are powerful subversions of the dominant culture's image of Natives as solitary and stoic while Margery Fee and Jane Flick focus on the pedagogical effect of King's perpetually referential jests. Fee and Flick claim that an attentive non-Native reader will be able to learn something about the Native perspective by catching King's allusions (the subtle as well as the less subtle) and thus begin to break down the borders constructed between cultures which King finds both so fascinating and so troubling. Not everyone, however, is amused. While Darrell Jesse Peters mentions that the satiric humour King employs when he appropriates various European and North American texts is a positive force, in regard to some other humorous moments, he remarks that "King's method seems to be, at times, both a bit

too easy and a little too 'punny'..." (Peters, 71). The humour in this text, in its various guises of satire, word play, and other forms, always garners a response. It is a major part of how King draws readers into his game. In Margaret Atwood's article, "A Double Bladed Knife: Subversive Laughter in Two Stories by Thomas King," she discusses King's brand of humour. About the stories Atwood says "They ambush the reader. They get the knife in, not by whacking you over the head with their own moral righteousness, but by being funny" (Atwood, 2). But just as King uses many different forms of humour to create his overall effect, humour is only one of the numerous ways in which he chooses to say a number of different things in the novel.

The discussion of humour in this book leads to an important question. What is this book about? Readers and critics alike are driven to ask not only what King intends to achieve with specific elements of the novel - the humour, the dialogic nature of the work, or even the perpetual presence of water in the text - but what he intends to say when he gathers up all of these threads and weaves them together to produce the whole that is Green Grass, Running Water. Largely, critics want to talk about King's novel as being a text mainly focused on resistance. This tendency is one to which I am not necessarily opposed because opposition to the dominant culture is an integral part of the book. The body of criticism as a whole does well to mark the number of elements within the text that contribute to a general project of resistance. In light of Thomas King's non-fiction, however, the discussion of his work in this way is problematic, especially when a critic attempts to use King's



writing as a representative example of a tradition of resistance in contemporary Native literature. In his essay "Godzilla vs. Post-Colonial," Thomas King asserts that placing Native Canadian fiction in the category of post-colonial literature is reductive and detrimental because such an action implies the literary accomplishments of Natives exist only as a reaction to colonial power and thus perpetuates tendencies to view Native peoples as one-dimensional and static or fixed. King refuses to accept post-colonialism as an adequate descriptor for Native Canadian literature. He argues that

the term organizes the literature progressively suggesting that there is both progress and improvement. No less distressing, it also assumes that the struggle between guardian and ward is the catalyst for contemporary Native literature, providing those of us who write with method and topic. And, worst of all, the idea of post-colonial writing effectively cuts us off from our traditions, traditions which have come down to us through our cultures in spite of colonization, and it supposes that contemporary Native writing is largely a construct of oppression. (Godzilla, 12)

The discussion of contemporary Native literature solely in terms of the colonial situation essentially dismisses much of the heterogeneity in what is a widely varied collection of texts. Because King himself is adamant that his work and the work of other contemporary Native Canadian authors should not be defined by the relationship between Natives and non-Natives, examining one of his novels as resistance literature is indeed a precarious pursuit. Opposition to the political situation of Canada's Indigenous peoples is nevertheless, an important aspect of the novel.

Laura E. Donaldson couches her discussion of the

subversive nature of Green Grass, Running Water in terms of intertextuality present in the novel, which is largely inseparable from its humour. The beginning of her essay briefly traces some developments in the understanding of intertextuality. Donaldson notes the literal meaning, "between textness," and summarizes Julia Kristeva's initial argument that it "describes the transposition of one sign system into another in order to exchange or to alter it: a gesture implying the displacement of the earlier system by the later and the condensation of the later system onto the earlier" (Donaldson, 28). She then goes on to express both her own and Pierre Bourdieu's concerns that Kristeva's definition is limiting in that it appears to make the meaning of a work solely dependent upon "the dialogic space of texts" or its relationship to one or more other works (Donaldson, 28). This definition dismisses too readily the internal dynamic existing within a texts themselves. It is necessary to consider both what a novel has to contribute to a dialogue between texts and what the significance of the intertextual references becomes once they are established within the context of the new book. Donaldson's argument concerning Green Grass, Running Water is that it is a resistant text because, "among other things, King attempts to displace and counteract the Christian transposition of aboriginal sign systems by rewriting one of its foundational narratives..." (Donaldson, 28). The importance of what King is doing when he rewrites the biblical stories as well as several major literary works of the European North American canon is also widely marked by other critics.

Also pointedly marking the intertextuality in King's

book is Sharon M. Bailey. However, her essay takes a slightly different tack than Donaldson's. Bailey is mainly concerned with King's choice to write this novel using a noticeably oral style. She argues that

the narrative structure of Green Grass, Running Water conspire[s] to sublimate English/Canadian/Anglo-American forms of textual authority.... The multivocal discourse undermines the authority assumed to be inherent in the written (and ostensibly stable) text, and the written text is forced into a losing battle to defend its truth value. (Bailey, 46)

The largely dialogic nature of King's novel asserts the "superiority of the more plastic oral storytelling technique" and thus, in part, the inherent value of Native thought.

Linda Lamont-Stewart examines Green Grass, Running Water alongside Timothy Findley's Not Wanted on the Voyage - yet another text to which King makes reference - and focuses her discussion on how both authors treat gender. The title of her piece, "Androgyny as Resistance to Authoritarianism in Two Postmodern Canadian Novels," summarizes the thrust of her argument very succinctly. Lamont-Stewart does note King's success in subverting both "conventional notions of linear time" (Lamont-Stewart, 117) and European imperialism. Ultimately, however, she holds that

The most crucial binary opposition that both texts undermine, through their employment of androgynous figures, is the biological sexual distinction between male and female, and more significantly, the socially constructed division of human beings and their appropriate status and behaviour according to gender, both within systems of social, religious and political power and authority. (Lamont-Stewart, 118)

Lamont-Stewart does make some excellent points in this article. However, the declaration that gender stereotypes are

the most important conventionally held notions King challenges in his novel is problematic because it does not adequately address the complexity of King's text. Throughout Green Grass, Running Water, King undermines or unfixes a wide range of ideas which are commonly thought to hold some measure of authority. One of his main concerns is the general human tendency to delineate definitive boundaries be they social, political or otherwise. In an interview with Jennifer Andrews King comments,

... and the border's not going anywhere and we keep constructing new borders. As soon as we get rid of the old ones we construct new ones. The big joke for me always was -- and this is pretty well documented -- that rich black women get along with rich white women better than they get along with poor black women. So you have all these borders that cut right through race too. Race is not a common denominator particularly. In some ways it is and in some ways it is not. You've got race, economics, social standing. All these things just sort of mix and match around.  
(Andrews, 163-4)

When King believes that these constructs are so prolific and the relationship between them so complex, to privilege one over the others as Stewart does is, I think, a mistake. Later in the same interview, King also mentions that "I think that's one of the tricks I try to accomplish, is to say that there is no line between what we can imagine and what we understand or what we see.... I really am concerned about breaking the borders down between reality and fantasy" (Andrews, 179). His interest in deconstructing borders moves beyond the multitude of sociopolitical problems and into the realm of the metaphysical. These concerns should again remind us that although King's novel contains a number of important statements which resist and question the authority

of the dominant culture, to define the book only in terms of its success as a resistant text is ultimately limiting.

Marlene Goldman's article, "Mapping and Dreaming: Native Resistance in Green Grass, Running Water," attempts to address King's concerns regarding the constructed nature of borders. Goldman appears to hold that King's subversion of the assumed accuracy of conventional maps asserts the superiority of Native mapping strategies. She looks closely at the cartographic symbolism present in the novel and argues that King's Native characters, mainly those in the younger generation, tend to lose themselves when they attempt to follow mapping strategies of the dominant culture. When guided or, indeed, misguided, by Euro-Canadian ideologies, their own senses of identity become confused and lost. According to Goldman, King presents a solution: "Throughout the novel, the circle and the Sun Dance, in particular, are offered as alternatives to the map...its goal lies in furnishing participants with a map of the universe in which their location is clearly demarcated" (Goldman, 34). In order to reassert their identities, the lost characters must take direction from Native cosmology.

Also for Goldman, King's cartographic symbolism, an indicator of the European imperialists' practice of forcibly, both literally and figuratively, inscribing themselves onto a landscape, is inexorably linked to Western faith in the authority of the written word. She asserts that

In King's novel, writing and mapping are complicitous activities that often serve to secure a Western world view. Owing to the close relationship he perceives between visual and written forms of codification, and the role they have played in securing the settler-invaders' understanding of 'reality,' King's project

also involves subverting a whole range of Western representational strategies, including the map, the linear narrative...the stereotype and literacy itself. (Goldman, 20)

King's text is resistant because it subverts Western world-views and revalidates Native ones. Again, it is not necessarily incorrect to come to these kinds of conclusions. Goldman's piece is solid and obviously well researched. She does, however, set up a strong Native versus non-Native binary opposite which she does not trouble in the same way that King ultimately problematizes his text.

Darrell Jesse Peters is adamant about the importance of this binary in King's work. He writes eloquently of King's "requir[ing] readers to consider and reconsider both themselves and the 'other'" (Peters, 67), "at times aggressively... reject[ing] the prescribed roles for 'the Indian'" (Peters, 67), and "rearticulating identity" (Peters, 70), all of which are, of course, very important aspects of Green Grass, Running Water. Near the beginning of his essay, Peters refutes some statements Percy Walton makes regarding King's first novel, Medicine River. He has difficulty with her statement that the book "avoids positing a new centre, a centre which would necessitate the construction of new margins" (Walton, 79). He responds by saying:

Even if King is not making a statement of cultural superiority by placing Native cultures in opposition to the dominant 'other,' which I believe he does to a certain extent, perhaps constructing the new margins Walton denies, he is certainly and unavoidably placing Native cultures in opposition to their representation as 'other' by the dominant culture....With any politically charged discourse, there is inherent opposition resulting in the construction of 'otherness' and the dynamics of a 'superiority/inferiority' relationship. (Peters, 68)

I believe Peters is correct in challenging Walton's interpretation of the fictional world King creates. It is clear that the margins or borders have not disappeared. However, Peters's refutation sets up a false dichotomy. Either King succeeds in removing all the boundaries or he is trapped within an inescapable binary opposition. Other critics have come up with alternative answers.

Although not directly responding to Peters, Donaldson asserts that "King uses the intertextual process in a more gentle and generous way: it neither subjugates nor obliterates but, rather, parodies and resists the way dominant Christian stories have too often been used" (Donaldson, 34). She does not agree that King is as openly confrontational as Peters appears to suggest. Bailey concurs, noting that "Rather than seriously presenting Indian and Anglo-American cultures as irreconcilably different, the novel portrays cultural differences as usually the result of artificially imposed expectations" (Bailey, 45). She also makes another important point when she says,

even though the Native oral text, recreated by the dialoguelike narrative structure, effectively undermines the authority of the written texts, it is unable to assume for itself that authority. The same forces that are set to work undermining the authority of the written works ultimately destroy the authority of the oral work as well. (Bailey, 46)

Bailey complicates her original pitting of oral against written texts in a way that reflects the difficulties King is trying to represent in Green Grass, Running Water. She continues this argument later by stating both that "although books and written texts are present in the novel in contrast to the oral story, it is not patent that the written story is

not subject to the same plasticity" and that "were Melville's novel truly inflexible, such a reading [King's] would not be possible" (Bailey, 50). In his interview with Jennifer Andrews, King speaks of how arduous a task it is to stop thinking in terms of constructed borders even when one knows that they exist. He confesses,

The call for equality just delights me in some ways because what it means is that those designations were created for advantage and not for ours, and as soon as that advantage shifts then the construct itself needs to be revisited. But of course, now we hold on to that construct. We're not willing to let it go, even though I understand that I should to make the world a better place.... Those constructs are important because we've had to live with the negative for so long that now that the positive is there, maybe the world will be a better place; maybe one of these days those constructs will be gone and human beings will just be human beings. But I'm afraid human beings being human beings is pretty scary all by itself. (Andrews, 163)

The tension created by simultaneously desiring to break down borders and to keep them is one of the driving forces behind Green Grass, Running Water.

Blanca Chester's contribution to the criticism also offers a way out of Peters' dichotomy. When she looks at King's novel, she sees, "King's apprehension...of theory as narrative, or as narrativized, also emphasizes the differences between Native and non-Native ways of knowing the world. He brings together Western theory and Native theory in a way that creates a dialogue between the two" (Chester, 45). She recognizes, like Peters, that the Native and the non-Native are set up one against the other, but claims King does so in order to facilitate a conversation rather than to mark his resistance with resentment.

At the point in his interview with King which touches on



the novel's constant allusions, Peter Gzowski comments, "See, sometimes -- I want to read it all again, 'cause I'm never sure I get all the resonance of the names, and I'm not sure when you're Coyote-ing me, you know, when you're just twiggin' me" (Gzowski Interview, 67). Gzowski's comment is significant. In some ways, King is indeed Coyote-ing his readership. Lamont-Stewart maintains that King's rendition of the trickster figure differs from the traditional version in that "King's Coyote is not malicious, and in fact generally seems well intentioned; his impulsive actions, nevertheless, are capable of producing catastrophic results in the form of various natural disasters" (Lamont-Stewart, 126). One of the aims of King's work, as has been echoed in various ways by a number of the critics, is the deconstruction of stereotypes about Natives and a reassertion of their cultural worth. A well-intentioned King sets out to break down borders, but, by his own admission in his interview with Andrews, deconstructing borders without accidentally constructing others is a virtually impossible task. Like Coyote and the Indians, however, King does not let this keep him from attempting to fix the world.

A few of the critics mention Green Grass, Running Water's dialogic style, but Chester treats the subject most extensively. She argues that King's novel largely takes the form of conversations and "by playing on the interconnectedness of a wide range of stories, King shows how meaning is always process-driven and consensual -- how it is inherently dialogic" (Chester, 47). She also adds that "King creates a dialogue between different cultural stories" (Chester, 54). Although King uses, as Chester notes, such a

variety of other texts within this novel, the time he spends conversing with Herman Melville is significant. In speaking of King's connection to Findley, Lamont-Stewart declares she "would argue that the reference [to Not Wanted on the Voyage in Green Grass, Running Water] is better read as linking the two novels in a common ideological project" (Lamont-Stewart, 116). I believe that King and Melville can also be linked in a common ideological project based, among other things, on their constant questioning of authority, their attempts to highlight the imbecility of racism and their relentless pursuits of truth despite knowledge that that goal is inherently elusive. Melville and King are very obviously writing from very different time periods and cultural contexts. However, the significance of Melville in Green Grass, Running Water is too great to ignore.

Something which is immediately apparent in King's book is the sheer volume of water contained within it. Rivers, puddles, oceans and rainstorms abound, inhabiting almost every page of the text. What does all this mean? Coyote ponders the same question : "'HMMMMM,' says Coyote. 'All this floating imagery must mean something'.... 'HMMMMM,' says Coyote. 'All this water imagery must mean something'" (GGRW, 352). King drops a hint near the beginning of the novel. When the four Old Indians are about to begin the story, they speak a ritual phrase in the Cherokee language which King says is "part of a thing called 'going to the water'" (Andrews, 181). He continues to explain that

basically it is just a request to know the future or to be able to see part of what the future has to offer. It's a device for the reader in some ways to understand that something is going to happen, that these guys

aren't there just for a little comic relief, as it were, that they're actually about to restructure the world or at least make an attempt at it. (Andrews, 181)

King has chosen to invoke this divination ritual at the beginning of the telling of a story. Every time he mentions a lake or a stream King is, in a sense, going back to the water. He subtly reminds readers (as he does more overtly with the constant retelling of the narrator's story) that stories are fluid and changeable and that they are always beginning again.

It can be said as well that a significant portion of Herman Melville's work incorporates water. In the opening chapter of Moby-Dick he writes,

Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul....I quietly take to the ship. There is nothing surprising in this. If they but knew it, almost all men in their degree, some time or other, cherish very near the same feelings toward the ocean with me.... Say you are in the country; in some high land of lakes. Take almost any path you please, and ten to one it carries you down to a dale, and leaves you there by a pool in the stream. There is magic in it. Let the most absent-minded of men be plunged into his deepest reveries - stand that man on his legs, set his feet a-going and he will lead you infallibly lead you to water.... Yes, as everyone knows, meditation and water are wedded forever.... Why did the old Persians hold the sea holy? Why did the Greeks give it a separate deity, and make him the own brother of Jove? Surely all this is not without meaning. And still deeper the meaning of that story of Narcissus, who because he could not grasp the tormenting mild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drowned. But that same image, we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all. (Moby-Dick, 12-13)

Melville, in a strikingly similar albeit not an identical way, is also "going to the water." The sea is the stuff of

mortal existence and the source of new beginnings .... The water in King's novel, among the other resonances, recalls Melville's fascination with the ocean. Such a comparison by itself may appear insignificant. However, it does not stand alone. Green Grass, Running Water is a novel that contains many allusions to a plethora of historical and literary figures and events. King, however, makes a relatively significant number of references to Melville's work, a choice which warrants exploration. The assertion that this novel is partially a conversation with Melville will no doubt inspire arguments that I am attempting to read King as part of a tradition to which he does not belong and therefore by which he cannot be judged. I would respond by saying that King is fully aware of the difficulties embedded in his novel and that this may be another one of his Coyote tricks. As Chester notes, it is no accident that the majority of this novel is in dialogue form. King opens a dialogue knowing full well that everything which eventually comes out of the conversation may not be positive, but he also knows that if people are not talking, cultural tensions are much less likely to dissipate.

Green Grass, Running Water is a resistant text. While it is vital to bear in mind the complexities of dealing with King's work as such, Peters and other critics are correct when they site resistance as being an integral part of the book. This novel is an effective resistant text because King asserts the strength of Native identities and because he vividly depicts numerous facets of the relationship which currently exists between Native and non-Native cultures in North America. In his novel King creates a complex dialogue

between the two.

Throughout the novel there are three main focal points of this conversation: Christianity, The Hollywood Western and Melville. All three are important, but I am most interested in the references to Melville because King virtually demands that his readers take notice of them. To no other author does King pay so much attention. William Defoe, Susanna Moodie, Pauline Johnson and James Fenimore Cooper are all mentioned in the novel, but none so persistently as Melville. King invokes Moby-Dick both directly during Changing Woman's story and again, indirectly, as part of Eli's. He mentions "Bartleby the Scrivener." King also names several characters in his novel after characters in "Benito Cereno," a short story of Melville's which resonates strongly with Green Grass, Running Water. This kind of direct and constant allusion to "Benito Cereno" charges the narrative with the sense that King is indeed engaging with Melville's work. Given the constant and prominent nature of King's references to Melville in this text, I find it odd that no critic has chosen to explore the topic. Apart from a few notes in passing, no work has been done on the relationship between King and Melville. I intend to explore this relationship.

"The Importance of Eli"

Green Grass, Running Water is, in part, a dialogue between Native and non-Native cultures. The characterization of Eli Stands Alone is an integral part of the novel because he is an embodiment of this conversation. Eli was born on a reservation near Blossom, Alberta, but left to pursue a university education. He excels at school and becomes a professor at the University of Toronto. He marries a white woman. Eventually, he returns to the reservation, takes up residence in his mother's old cabin and begins a long legal battle against a company building a dam which, if operational, would flood the land on which his home currently stands. When King introduces Eli into the book, this struggle is in its tenth year. Eli is a complex character who does not entirely fit in either the Native world or the non-Native world. Eli is a minority in the world outside his reservation, but when he returns home, he does not completely reintegrate into the community. In ten years back on the reservation he has not been to a Sun Dance and we rarely see him outside of his cabin until the end of the novel approaches.

Who is Eli? He himself is searching for the answer to this question throughout the novel and, if he finds it, neither he nor King makes the answer known. Other characters, both Native and non-Native, are trying to understand Eli as well. By depicting his interactions with these characters, King offers readers a multiplicity of perspectives. It is important to think about these multiple

perspectives considering that Eli is a focal point in the cultural exchange. In this chapter I will explore the attempts Norma, Sifton, Karen and Eli himself make to this end. The complexities of Eli's character, like the complexities of the dialogue between Native and non-Native cultures, are very difficult to grasp. Eli is central to the idea of Green Grass, Running Water as a conversation between cultures, as is King's use of Melville in the text. Indeed, King actually links Eli and Moby-Dick directly bringing these two important pieces of the novel together. I will conclude with an exploration of the parallel King draws between Eli and Captain Ahab, which adds another perspective to Eli's character and further explains his importance to this text.

Norma offers a unique perspective on his character. Because Norma has not ventured outside the reserve, she may seem like a questionable choice of character to explore during an examination of how the movement of leaving and returning to the reservation works in Green Grass, Running Water. She is an important part of this discussion, however, because she espouses some very definite views about the relative value of ventures into the outside world. Little good, she believes, can come of them. The way in which King chooses to present Norma's insistent opinions is important to his discussion of truth in the novel.

Early on we realize that we cannot completely trust Norma's outlook on the circumstances involving her extended family. When she is discussing Lionel's current employment situation with him, she points to his sister Latisha as an example. Lionel has some difficulties with the way Norma paints Latisha's supposed success:

"Your sister is the smart one in the family, that's for sure."

"What about George Morningstar? Real smart choice, that one." ...

"Look at your sister. She makes her own luck."

"What about George Morningstar?"

"That restaurant of hers is going to make her a rich woman."

"What about George Morningstar? He used to beat the hell out of her."

"Nice to have a real Indian restaurant in town."

"She sells hamburger."

"People come from all over the world to eat at the Dead Dog Café."

"She sells hamburger and tells everyone that it's dog meat."

"Germany, Japan, Russia, Italy, Brazil, England, France, Toronto. Everybody comes to the Dead Dog."

"The Blackfoot didn't eat dog."

"It's for the tourists."

"In the old days, dogs guarded the camp. They made sure we were safe."

"Latisha has time to come out to the reserve and visit us, too. Always helps with the food for the Sun Dance. Helps out with other things, too." (GGRW, 56-7)

The way the conversation progresses here is important because Norma simply does not respond to Lionel's comments about her niece's unfortunate choice of husbands. By avoiding his remarks, she is in a sense strategically creating her own story from selective details of Latisha's life.

Norma applies this method of creative editing to other situations as well. While criticizing Eli over the phone after their mother's death, Norma also says, regarding the log cabin, "You were born there before you went off and became white" (GGRW, 113). Immediately following Eli's recounting of his conversation with Norma, he recalls his mother building the cabin "log by log" while he and Norma looked on, being too little to offer any assistance (GGRW, 113). Norma's story, which constructs the log cabin as Eli's



birthplace, appears to be historically incorrect. The effect of these almost blatant omissions and inaccuracies in Norma's narrative is a mounting suspicion that there might be significantly more detail involved in Eli's story than in the abridged version with which she initially presents us. As the novel progresses, we learn that Eli's life is much more complex than the story which depicts him as wanting to be a white man, leaving the reserve, and then returning to where he belongs as a result of attending a Sun Dance.

Norma both constructs her inaccuracies and omissions intentionally and understands that others are aware of them. Lionel and Norma discuss why it was that Eli finally returned to the reservation to take up his post guarding the old family home. Initially, Norma professes that, "he's still there. Coming to the Sun Dance is what did it. Straightened him right out and he came home" (GGRW, 62). Lionel remains unimpressed. He corrects her by saying, "He went back to Toronto. He went back to Toronto after the Sun Dance. He came home after Granny died. That's all that happened. And he came home then because he had retired" (GGRW, 63). Whether Eli returned permanently to the reservation because he retired is also conjecture as far as we are concerned, because King chooses not to confirm or deny Lionel's assertion during the course of the novel. Norma's response to Lionel's statement regarding the events leading up to Eli's homecoming is an important one. She answers, "He came home, nephew. That's the important part. He came home" (GGRW, 63). Here Norma appears to feel that the reason Eli actually returned is inconsequential because what she finds most valuable about a story is the end result.

When Norma embellishes a story or omits seemingly significant details, she does so because what is ultimately important about that story is what the listener can take away from it. Following Eli's death, Norma asks Lionel, "Eli tell you why he came home?" (GGRW, 422). When Lionel replies by saying, "He was going to. But he never did," she muses, "Just as well .... Always best to figure those things out for yourself" (GGRW, 422). With this response Norma intimates that Lionel needs to find his own solutions to the questions surrounding Eli's return to the reservation. Moreover, she suggests that the answers Lionel discovers will be the ones which will aid him most in his own struggle to come to terms with his connections to both the reservation and to the outside world. Regardless of Eli's fate, Lionel can learn from his story.

King seems to focus his examination of the difficulties arising from attempts to negotiate the space between Euro-Canadian and Native Canadian cultures on Eli. The first time we hear anything about Eli, it is from his sister Norma during a conversation she is having with their nephew. Norma is definitely forthcoming with her opinions regarding her brother's desires to live and work in Toronto. She unreservedly informs Lionel,

Your uncle went to university, just like you. Only he graduated. With a Ph.D. ....Used to dress up, just like you. You know, Eli would polish his shoes so you could see the sky when you looked down .... Your uncle wanted to be a white man. Just like you. (GGRW, 36)

Norma equates such aspirations with the desire to completely assimilate into white society and her attitude is apparent in her relation of the inverted image of the sky reflected on

the surface of Eli's patent leather shoes. This image suggests that in dressing in a Euro-Canadian fashion Eli is attempting, like the white men, to be in control of everything - to have the very sky at his feet as it were.

Eli himself does not enter the story until approximately a quarter of the way through the book. When we first meet him, he has been back from Toronto, living in his mother's cabin and waging, for the past ten years, a one man war against those attempting to render the Grand Baleen Dam operational. He is involved in a conversation with Clifford Sifton, the only agent from the dam company we are introduced to in the novel. This exchange establishes Eli's relationship with Sifton by way of depicting two encounters between the two men; the first, ten years ago, and the current, which represents the almost ritualistic association they have shared all this time. Sifton senses during their first meeting that Eli might not be agreeable to his mother's house being destroyed as evidenced in the following conversation:

    "Don't know that I want anyone tearing this house down."

    "Construction starts in a month."

    "Maybe it will," said Eli. "And maybe it'll have to wait." (GGRW, 114)

Sifton immediately offers his hand along with the assurance that this project is "Nothing personal" (GGRW, 114). Their relationship has apparently been "nothing personal" ever since. Sifton has come no closer to understanding Eli's reasons for refusing to move in all this time, lamenting that "it would help if sometime you would tell me why," when he should, if he had been paying attention to ten years worth of

morning coffee conversations, already know the answer (GGRW, 137). Jane Flick states that the historical Sir Clifford Sifton was an

aggressive promoter of settlement in the West through the Prairie West movement, and a champion of the settlers who displaced the Native population. [He was also] Federal minister of the Interior and Superintendent of Indian Affairs in Laurier's government from November 1896. (Flick, 148)

King's Sifton is meant to call the historical figure to mind and perhaps to give readers a deeper understanding of the prejudices the character has.

As it stands, Sifton and Eli spend a lot of time speaking, rather than listening to one other. Indicators of their inability to communicate abound in the sections of the novel where we see them together. As Sifton makes his way towards Eli's cabin, the first time readers witness a meeting between these men, we are presented with an intriguing exchange:

Eli could also see Clifford Sifton walking down the streambed, and he waved to Sifton and Sifton waved back. "You want some coffee?" Eli shouted, though he knew Sifton couldn't hear him above the rush of the water. Sifton raised his walking stick and shouted back, but Eli couldn't hear him either. (GGRW, 110)

This inaudible conversation appears to reflect their relationship - Eli and Cliff are speaking to each other, but neither man is actually able to hear the other one. At some points, even though there are no physical barriers to their conversation, they continue to talk past one another:

"It's a beauty isn't it?" said Sifton, swirling the remains of the coffee around in the cup.  
 "You know, if your cabin faced west, you'd have a great view of the dam from your front window."  
 "View is fine as it is."

"It's nice in the morning. Sort of white. Like a shell."

"Reminds me of a toilet," said Eli.

"But the evening is best ..." (GGRW, 136)

For the most part, it seems that Sifton is choosing not to pay attention to what Eli is saying. King makes it very obvious that this problem is detrimental to their attempts at relating on political terms. When Eli refers to the dam as "your dam," Sifton replies, "Not my dam, Eli. And you know it" (GGRW, 111). When Eli points out that "None of the recommended sites was on Indian land," Sifton responds with, "I just build them, Eli. I just build them" (GGRW, 111). He professes that "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" (GGRW, 111). Sifton does not believe that his actions and his complacency about the project have political repercussions, and in order to maintain this perception, he must evade or ignore Eli's comments. Although King is by no means insisting that problems resulting from miscommunication are entirely the fault of Euro-Canadians -- the theme of faulty communication runs throughout this novel plaguing Native and non-Natives alike - I believe that he is using Eli and Sifton's relationship, if only partially, to illuminate the tendency to ignore the Native voice.

King uses this relationship to direct us to two more important issues specifically relevant to a discussion of unfixity. Another consequence of the relative impersonality of Sifton's and Eli's daily ritual is that their roles have become very defined. Sifton complains, "You know you're

going to say no, and I know you're going to say no. Hell, the whole damn world knows you're going to say no. Might as well put it on television" (GGRW, 138), and then parodies their daily exchange playing both roles. Here Sifton brings a presupposition of Eli's stoicism to the habitual conversation. In response, "Eli laughed and shook his head. 'That's pretty good, Cliff. Real soon now you'll be able to do it all by yourself. You won't need me at all'" (GGRW, 141). The idea is amusing but it is also very telling. Sifton views this as a drama with solidly fixed roles and by doing so he allows no possibility for change. Eli's comment is very poignant, suggesting that the danger of assuming roles and identities are fixed is that individuality becomes removed from the equation and relationships between people and cultures become masses of assumptions one party holds about another. The potential for unfixity, fluidity and change are therefore limited or negated.

Also, in a conversation regarding the relative worth of treaty rights Sifton exclaims, "Besides, you 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" (GGRW, 141), raising the question of authenticity. Sifton's vision of a 'real Indian' is the one favoured by the makers of Hollywood westerns like the one which plays such a prevalent role in this novel. At the same time, however, he tells Eli that "You can't live in the past. My dam is part of the twentieth century. Your house is part of the nineteenth" (GGRW, 141). Eli's choices appear to be very limited. He can either fulfill the stereotypical nineteenth century Native image and be a "proper" Indian who is

technologically unversed, stoic and uncommunicative, or he can "become part of the twentieth century" and assimilate to Euro-Canadian culture. Sifton's insistence that only this historically fixed image represents what is Indian is obviously problematic for contemporary Natives. Eli, however, refuses to choose one of these polemical options. His calm manner and his confidence in his own identity are unwavering as he counters Sifton's points at every turn and finally insists, although Sifton still does not relent, that "this is [his] home" (GGRW, 142). At the close of this scene, the only time we are witness to a conversation between these two men in real time, Cliff heads back across the river, turns, and attempts to shout something to Eli. Appropriately, "the sound was snatched up by the wind and drowned in the rushing water" and Eli says nothing in return (GGRW, 143).<sup>1</sup> Apparently it is no longer worth the effort, and for the remainder of the narrative Eli leaves Sifton with mouth agape and turns his attention to other, more important things.

In this conversation, Eli is a long way from the young man who left for university so many years before and different from the man who contacted his family so little while he was away that his sister, apparently out of spite, did not call him with news of his mother's death until weeks afterwards. During his conversation with Sifton, Eli is presented as a man with very strong convictions, a man with a cause from which he will not back away. This is certainly a different representation of his character than the one we

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<sup>1</sup> Flick notes the "ironic detail" that Sifton "suffered from deafness throughout his life" (Flick, 148).

first glean from Norma in conversation with Lionel at the beginning of the novel, and it is also different from the character we see both when Eli is alone and when he is looking back on particular events in his life. In these moments he does not seem quite so sure of himself. Thus, King has created a complex, dynamic character who does not fit exactly into either of the two possible roles prescribed for him during our first encounters with him in the narrative, that of the Indian who wants to be a white man, or that of the wise man of few words, alienated and unmovable.

In the third section of the novel, Eli begins to relate the story of his relationship with Karen. The points in the narrative where we see Eli away from the reservation are all bound up in this relationship. The younger version of himself that Eli recalls is someone who seems very willing to accept direction, because he has, in comparison to Karen at least, little himself.

When Eli first meets Karen, she begins to direct his reading practices in a very overt manner. Eli remembers that "Karen began lending him books. Some of them were interesting. He rather liked the one about the Halifax explosion ....Others were not as interesting. 'These are about Indians, Eli. You should read them'" (GGRW, 161). Although Karen's concept of what a Native should be differs from Sifton's Hollywood vision of what being Indian means, her confidence that she knows what Eli should be reading suggests that she does indeed have a fixed image of what it means to be Indian. Her use of the word 'should' discounts the possibility that Eli may have other literary preferences. In fact, she ignores his tastes altogether. Eli remembers a



time when he

... found a copy of Stephen Leacock's *Arcadian Adventures of the Idle Rich* at a used-book store.

"You ought to read it," he told Karen. "It's funny as hell."

"A little on the light side," Karen told him. "Here," and she gave him a thin volume by Dorothy somebody. 'Imagist poetry'... (GGRW, 162)

And another when he

tried to hint that he had no objection to a Western or another New Woman novel, and Karen would laugh and pull another book out of her bag. Magic.

"You have to read this one, Eli. It's about the Blackfoot."

What amazed Eli was that there were so many. (GGRW, 162)

She dismisses his book selections and continues with her own agenda. Karen perpetually presents Eli with books which she believes that will or should be of interest to him because he is Native. When she suggests novels she says things like, "This one is about a kind of mythic character who comes out of the ground. He fights a bear. You'll like that" (GGRW, 162). She assumes he will enjoy things which are considered "traditionally Native".

In her article entitled, "Mapping and Dreaming: Native Resistance in *Green Grass, Running Water*," Marlene Goldman asserts that

It is no coincidence that all three of the younger characters, namely, Lionel Red Dog, Alberta Frank, and Charlie Looking Bear lack direction in their lives and are in dire need of guidance and/or maps. At one point or another, all three embark on road trips that go awry. Yet the novel intimates that their journeys will never assume a meaningful direction, so long as they stick to the man-made road and continue to rely on non-Native discursive maps. (Goldman, 27)

I would argue that the younger Eli has a somewhat similar problem. He is lost because he has chosen to follow the discursive map Karen offers in the form of her reading lists. He becomes extremely uncomfortable when he brings Karen home for the Sun Dance and this discomfort is exemplified by the way Eli and Karen travel back to the Blossom reservation. Karen's father lends them his car, a De Soto<sup>2</sup>, which works wonderfully well until, approaching the reserve, the paved highways give way to more mutable gravel roads. The car, so suited for well-maintained and definitive roadways, then becomes less of an asset and more of an encumbrance. As Goldman argues regarding Lionel, Alberta and Charlie's journeys, the younger Eli's search for identity cannot move forward until he seeks guidance from Native as well as Euro-Canadian culture. Not doing so is potentially very damaging.

Although a large number of the reading selections she presents Eli with centre around indigenous culture, they do not - recall the imagist poetry - all follow that vein. Karen is trying to be helpful by directing Eli's reading and most likely believes that she is progressive because she is able to provide Eli with such an extensive annotated list of books, but something is clearly amiss. King appears to intentionally present her suggestions as a more subtle expression of Sifton's idea of a fixed Native identity. In a very telling statement regarding Karen and Eli's relationship the narrator allows that "Karen liked the idea that Eli was

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<sup>2</sup>Flick notes that the De Soto "is named for an explorer, Hernando De Soto (1500-1542), Spanish Conquistador, with Pizarro in Peru. [He] moved through Florida, Georgia, the Carolinas, Tennessee and Oklahoma, wreaking cultural havoc." (Flick, 158)

Indian, and she forgave him, she said, his pedestrian taste in reading" (GGRW, 163). Grammatically of course, it is Eli's "pedestrian taste in reading" that Karen forgives Eli. The sentence, however, is constructed in an interesting fashion. Because the phrase which relays Karen's appreciation of Eli's 'Indianness' comes directly before the one relating her forgiving, the first part of the sentence reads as if Karen were forgiving Eli for being an Indian. King's word order encapsulates Eli's early relationship with Karen well because it reveals the underlying negative repercussions of Karen's direction.

To Karen's various suggestions regarding his reading material, Eli simply replies, "Okay" (GGRW, 161). He is overwhelmed by Karen, and King draws our attention to this when the narrator notes that Eli "was not prepared for [Karen's] question" regarding his taste in novels (GGRW, 161). Throughout the passages which relate Eli's preliminary encounters with Karen, Eli demonstrates that he is willing to accept her ideas regarding what constitutes valuable literature. King also shows us some moments of miscommunication between Karen and Eli which are similar in form to Eli's later conversation with Sifton. Eli and Karen have the following exchange as Karen attempts to discern the reason behind Eli's unwillingness to return with her to the Sun Dance:

"You're probably just nervous, Eli," Karen had said.  
 "That's not it."  
 "And I understand."  
 "That's not it."  
 "What you should do is go out there by yourself. Then, once you're comfortable about going home and you're not embarrassed anymore...." (GGRW, 286)

While Eli is not necessarily completely overwhelmed or passive here, Karen does create the reason for Eli's reluctance without waiting for an answer he might give her. Eli also does not pursue correcting her. Conversely, in Sifton's conversation with Eli, Sifton has been given the answer to his question although he does not choose to hear it. In both cases, someone from the world outside the reservation is not listening to Eli.

The relationships between Karen and Eli and between Sifton and Eli, however, also differ in important ways. Eli himself is different. Early in his relationship with Karen he is a young university student, while during his relationship with Sifton he is considerably older and has matured and gained confidence in himself through a lifetime of experiences. More significantly, though, when Eli is with Karen he is off the reservation, but when he is with Sifton he is on reserve and Sifton is the one who must come in from the outside. In the latter relationship Eli is able to debate while in the former he appears to choose not to. Of course this difference is partially due to the fact that Karen's behaviour raises contended political issues in a very indirect and subtle way compared to Sifton's frank discussion of the issues. With Karen, there is nothing out in the open with which Eli can argue.

Initially, King appears to present Eli as someone who has come to terms with his identity. After reading only the first section recounting Eli's and Karen's relationship, it is entirely possible to accept Norma's version of Eli as correct: a directionless man who leaves the reservation in search of his identity and only finds it upon returning home.

In his conversations with Sifton he is solidly sure of himself, while in those he has with Karen, he appears much less so. The process, however, is much more complicated, and King constructs it in an extremely intriguing fashion. We first encounter Eli as a calm, confident, yet unrelenting activist. The next image of Eli we see is that of an apparently overwhelmed much younger man. When the two images are juxtaposed like this they invite or tempt the reader to fill the intervening time between the purposeful, politically savvy older man and the directionless youth with a classic coming of age story culminating in a person who has a solid sense of his own identity. King, however, does not allow this idea to percolate for long as he begins to develop the complexities of Eli's character.

The first storyline we might imagine Eli's life to have followed, based on our first encounters with him, is a construction which cannot remain fixed. The narration slowly begins to reveal that the doubt surrounding his identity, which he has struggled with all his life, still lingers unresolved. Questions like, "What had Eli become? What had he wanted to be?" are prevalent in his more thoughtful moments (GGRW, 285). All of Eli's questions and struggles complicate his character immensely, and as a complex character who is still striving and changing, he cannot be fixed in any stereotypical way.

Eli is a complex character because he continues to struggle with a number of difficult issues, but the role Thomas King constructs for Eli in the novel is also a complicated one. Eli has returned to the reservation, but he still appears largely isolated from the people on the

reserve. He has been living in his mother's old cabin for ten years, yet Harley must reacquaint him with community news at the Sun Dance. He is taking his stand against the Grand Baleen Dam, but he does so alone as his surname cleverly notes. Eli does not involve the media, organize demonstrations or destroy the dam company's property. He follows all the proper channels of the Euro-Canadian justice system for the duration of his fight although there are a plethora of alternative tactics to which he could resort. Eli is a man negotiating the space between his Native Canadian roots and his Euro-Canadian education and lifestyle outside of the reservation. Some might argue that this type of search for a hybrid identity is standard fare in texts where characters are strongly connected to two separate cultures. King manages, however, to address the significant struggle involved in attempting to incorporate two cultural identities into a single existence while he remains moderately unconventional. It is important that King's portrayal of Eli directly draws our attention to the unremarkable nature of his story. As Eli ponders this situation he considers himself

The Indian who couldn't go home.

It was a common enough theme in novels and movies.

Indian leaves the traditional world of the reserve, goes to the city, and is destroyed. Indian leaves the traditional world of the reserve, is exposed to white culture, and becomes trapped between two worlds. Indian leaves traditional world of the reserve, gets an education, and is shunned by his tribe.

Indians. Indians. Indians.

Ten little Indians. ...

The Indian who couldn't go home. (GGRW, 286-87)

And Eli certainly has, thanks to Karen, read enough books

about Indians to place his own difficulties within a tradition. If we are speaking about King's employment of unfixity as a specific resistance strategy in this novel, it is important at this point to reiterate Barbara Harlow's explanation that resistance literature "calls attention to itself, and to literature in general, as a political and a politicized activity" (Harlow, 28). When Eli conflates his story with those in the novels he has read, he reminds us that he is also a character in a fictional tale. In doing so, he forces us to examine the political implications of the literary conventions constructed to tell stories about Native Canadians and about the roles usually reserved for Indians in literature.

There is another important aspect to the role Eli's character plays in this novel. When Sifton and Eli are discussing the relative aesthetic qualities of the dam Sifton happens to remark, "It's nice in the morning. Sort of white. Like a shell" (GGRW, 136). Initially this comment may not seem to be significant in any way but it becomes relevant when coupled with some further details. During the same conversation between Eli and Sifton, Cliff becomes frustrated with Eli's stubborn stance, and huffs,

"You know, when I was in high school, I read a story about a guy just like you who didn't want to do anything to improve his life. He just sat on a stool in some dark room and said, 'I would prefer not to.' That's all he said." (GGRW, 141-42)

The conversation continues:

"'Bartleby the Scrivener.'"  
 "What?"  
 "'Bartleby the Scrivener.' One of Herman Melville's short stories."  
 "I guess. The point is that this guy had lost

touch with reality. And you know what happens to him at the end of the story?"

"It's fiction, Cliff."

"He dies. That's what happens. Suggest anything to you?"

"We all die, Cliff." (GGRW, 142)

It is somewhat ironic that Sifton connects Eli and Bartleby because Sifton conceives of Bartleby as a man whose complete lack of active participation eventually means the death of him<sup>3</sup>. Eli does appear withdrawn and isolated from his community, but he has been active and, as far as we understand from the novel, singularly focused on his battle against the dam for ten years. Moby-Dick is given more attention in Green Grass, Running Water.

The Grand Baleen Dam is central part of the novel and is of much critical interest. While those who discuss Green Grass, Running Water may do so along certain thematic lines, there is, as should be expected, some differentiation in interpretation. Two critics are both sure beyond argument that the novel's dam represents two entirely different non-fictional dams; Herb Wylie favours the Grand Coulee Dam on the Columbia River (Wylie, 116) and Florence Stratton the Great Whale project in northern Quebec (Stratton, 93). Oddly, neither one considers the Oldman River Dam which was built in the area of southern Alberta wherein the story takes place. This dam shares a similar history to King's creation as its operations were held up by Native land claims for the better part of the 1980's. It is possible that King intends readers to connect his creation with a number of different dams. In his interview with Jennifer Andrews, he says, "I<sup>3</sup> Comically, Sifton's interpretation of "Bartleby the Scrivener" is just as suspect as his interpretation of Eli.



always try to figure out ways to make what I do in fiction lean in a number of different directions at the same time..." (Andrews, 173). While I would not go so far as to say the Grand Baleen is representative of all hydro electric projects, the fact that it can be linked to more than one non-fictional dam is not surprising.

A number of critics who touch on the subsequent destruction of the dam and Eli along with it discuss the event as a rewriting of Christopher Columbus's story; however, there are other interpretations. Though they readily note the Columbus connection, Fee and Flick comment that "this novel climaxes, flushed or overflows in an outburst of scatological humour ... as three used cars, the symbolic shit of twentieth century technology, overflow the toilet" (Fee and Flick, 133). Donaldson also mentions the Columbus connection. She notes that "the watery parade of cars -- a Nissan, a Pinto and a Carmen Ghia[sic] -- echoes this liberatory movement since the faint recollections of the Nina, the Pinto and the Santa Maria suggest a washing away of Columbus's colonial heritage" (Donaldson, 39-40). However Donaldson perceives a second reference as well. She sees Eli as "a kind of First Nations Noah who rewrites the biblical story by blocking the water rather than sailing it" (Donaldson, 39). It is extremely plausible that King designed this moment in the text to resonate in all three of these directions at once. What I propose is an addition to the list. Essentially, the Grand Baleen Dam (again, the name is worthy of note) is Eli's great white whale and, as is Ahab's fate, his cause eventually destroys him.

The meaning of the whale in Moby-Dick is a hotly

contested issue. It has been argued that Ahab's leviathan is an allegorical figure representing a list of things ranging from God to the Devil. Although the scope of this chapter does not allow for an extended discussion of Melville's novel and critical interpretations thereof, I believe King's references to Moby-Dick are an important aspect of Green Grass, Running Water. The great white whale is a symbol with such a wealth of possible meanings, an "evolution of an image," that it fits King's agenda perfectly (Feidelson, 672). Figuratively and literally, it appears to function within Melville's novel as a floating signifier.

Because the meaning of the whale is so elusive, it is possible that Ahab's search is in fact one for meaning itself - Moby-Dick signifies signification and Ahab's is a quest for an absolute truth. If the whale is an evolving image, to destroy the whale is to fix the meaning of it definitively. Ahab's attempt means his own destruction.

King consistently attempts to demonstrate that absolute truth and definitive meaning cannot exist for people in any practical way. When Eli returns home, he begins his fight against the Grand Baleen dam almost immediately and this struggle becomes a vehicle for his attempt to find meaning in his life. Eli spends a great deal of time alone in his cabin thinking about the past, examining his identity issues and trying to come to terms with the reason he is "the Indian who couldn't go home" (GGRW, 287). Near the end of the novel, he begins to make progress as he ventures out of his cabin and begins to reconnect with his community - deciding to attend and even participate in the Sun Dance, for example, though before he can resolve these issues, he is lost in the flood.

Like Ahab, Eli comes extremely close to capturing meaning but falls just short.

As we would expect from King, however, Ahab's story and Eli's are not directly equatable. Both men are driven to destroy something they regard as an attack on their sense of self, as something that represents the potential erasure of their place in the cosmos and their quests become a search for meaning. In both cases, these missions eventually lead to their deaths, but the significance of the destruction they pursue differs. King is, in a sense, partially using Eli to rewrite Melville's tragedy. While Ahab tries to kill the whale and destroy the fluidity of the symbol, Eli is fighting for movement in opposition to friction and stasis. The dam is disrupting the natural flow of the river. The water is trapped or fixed and this creates a build up in tension which reflects the tension created by fixed stereotypes, which King explores with the relationship between Sifton and Eli and with other relationships and encounters throughout the novel. When the dam breaks, though he is lost, and although King obviously does not attempt to say that this release of tension universally solves the cultural tension between Native and Euro-Canadians, Eli has gained a victory. The novel ends on a positive note when the women gather to rebuild the cabin and Norma and Lionel express intentions to continue Eli's fight, thus making his previously isolated effort a communal one. Even though Eli's effort is an attempt to fix or define himself, King relentlessly maintains that fixity cannot exist whether the intentions of those attempting to fix things are positively or negatively motivated.

"The Relativity of Truth in King and Melville"

In comparing King's Green Grass, Running Water with Melville's work, I have found that one of the major affinities which exist between the two authors is the status they each grant questions regarding the nature of truth. In this chapter I will discuss some of the ways King and Melville write about this elusive subject. The relationship between truth and stories is significant for both authors, as are questions regarding the human search for truth. Where do we look for truth? Is it possible that we will ever find it? Though their ideas on the subject are not necessarily identical, both King and Melville appear to conceive of truth in a strikingly similar manner. The similarities are important to explore given the dialogue King opens with Melville in his novel and so I have dedicated this chapter to that end.

Neither author believes it possible to talk about truth in any definitive way. Throughout the majority of his fiction Melville is perpetually using words and phrases such as "perhaps", "what would seem", "might be", "not unlikely", and "could be." The prevalence of these qualifiers constantly reminds readers that the version of the story the narrator is relating to them may not necessarily be true. King also refuses to allow readers any definitive sense of truth of which they can grab hold. There is a line in Green Grass, Running Water which succinctly captures one of its main themes. The unnamed narrator says, "There are no truths.... Only stories" (GGRW, 391). According to King, it

would seem that absolute truth is an impossibility. However readily this phrase summarizes King's discussion of truth in his novel, relying solely upon it to elucidate King's views pertaining to truth inside or outside the context of the novel is potentially misleading and ultimately reductive.

Taken out of context, King's narrator's phrase has the potential to be misinterpreted as a polemical position seemingly advocating that stories exist instead of truths. To say that there is no truth at all is akin to saying there is an absolute truth and then proceeding to outline definitively exactly what that is. In either case an easy answer is given to deal with difficult questions, and the struggle involved in grappling with those questions - an activity associated with critical, intelligent thought - is conspicuously avoided. The assertion that stories exist in place of truths may not seem like an erroneous one to make and it is, in fact, partially correct. The discernment of truth is a complex undertaking and there are many perspectives to consider when endeavouring to answer existential questions or reconstruct historical events. The stories people tell often incorporate both their attempts to grapple with fundamental queries about the nature of the cosmos and to present their understanding of history. Problems arise, however, if the search for truth is abandoned and every theory - existential or historical, unexamined or not - is accepted as plausible. I do not believe King intends to advance such a position. In saying that "There are no truths....Only stories," King is not denying the possibility of some larger, overarching concept of Truth although I believe he would disagree strongly with anyone who felt s/he

could define that truth beyond the question of a doubt.

Because of her relevance to a conversation about truth in this novel, a brief return to the discussion of Norma Stands Alone from the previous chapter is warranted at the moment. Norma is creative when it comes to narrating the lives of her family members. When she gives us the reason for Eli's return to the reservation and Lionel exasperatedly debunks it, two things happen which are worthy of note. First, although Lionel certainly appears to feel that his account of why Eli returned is factually based, his solution to the mystery of Eli's home-coming is neither confirmed or denied within the context of the novel. King never directly answers that question at all. He does not give Lionel's explanation any more authority than he does Norma's, thus highlighting the difficulties involved in discerning truth. Secondly, of equal or perhaps more importance is Norma's response to Lionel's rebuff. To reiterate, she patiently states, "He came home nephew. That's the important part. He came home" (GGRW, 63). When Norma says this she lets us know that she is completely aware of what she is doing with her stories. She understands that she is fabricating both motivation and detail to suit her own purposes whereas Lionel is convinced of his own assertion.

King's choice to make her aware is a significant one. Later in the novel when Norma asks Lionel, "Eli tell you why he came home?" it becomes apparent that she believes there is a real answer to this question although she cannot access it. Lionel's answer and her own are equally conjecture, and to complicate matters further, Eli himself appears unsure about his reasons at some points. We discover that Eli initially

comes home when he learns of his mother's death, but his choice to remain is definitely less clear, as the following exchange between Eli and Norma demonstrates:

"Don't have to stay home if you don't want to,"  
 said Norma.  
 "I'm not going to stay."  
 "Probably don't have all the fancy things here you  
 have in Toronto."  
 "I just came back to see the place."  
 "Of course, being as you're the oldest, you can  
 stay as long as you like."  
 "It's just a visit."  
 "Everybody should have a home."  
 "Probably stay a month or two."  
 "Even old fools."  
 Looking back, Eli could see that he had never made  
 a conscious decision to stay. And looking back, he knew  
 it was the only decision he could have made.  
 (GGRW, 262-3)

Even though King later implies that Eli has an answer regarding why he returned home, when Lionel makes a direct query he replies, "Can't just tell you that straight out. Wouldn't make any sense. Wouldn't be much of a story" (GGRW, 361). Near the end of the novel, Norma asks Lionel about this conversation. She continues to search for the truth about Eli's home-coming despite having manufactured her own answer to the query. Also, Eli's comment immediately above suggests that work is an indispensable part of determining truth. Both of these positions suggest that what is important about truth is not whether it can actually be found and delineated, but the search itself. As Norma prudently counsels, it is "Always best to figure those things out for yourself" (GGRW, 422). The quest for truth and meaning is an integral part of the human experience and thus it is not enough to accept the product of someone else's search. The struggle with these questions must be undertaken individually

because they are the basis of intellectual dynamism and vitality.

Another noteworthy implication of Eli's response to Lionel's query is that stories are a vitally important part of quests for either Truth or truths of any sort. Stories or works of literature may not provide determinate answers, but they ask pertinent questions and fuel the search for truth or meaning. So, perhaps another implication of the statement, "There are no truths . . . . Only stories," aside from the assertion that stories exist instead of truths, is that small fragments of truth reside inside stories. This certainly seems to be an idea with which Melville would agree. In an essay entitled "Hawthorne and His Mosses" that he writes in praise of Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story collection, Mosses From an Old Manse, Melville states:

For in this world of lies, Truth is forced to fly like a scared white doe in the woodlands; and only by cunning glimpses will she reveal herself, as in Shakespeare and other masters of the great Art of Telling the Truth, -- even though it be covertly and by snatches ("Mosses," 2205).

Truth does exist for Melville, but it cannot enter into human understanding by any direct means. Also, although he does imply that there are others, the only name Melville specifies here as a "master of the great Art of Telling the Truth" is Shakespeare, a writer of fiction. For both King and Melville, stories are of the utmost importance and the role of fiction in elucidating truth is a topic that warrants much thought.

In Green Grass, Running Water, King seems to be preoccupied with the relationship between truth and stories.



The way he writes Norma's character is very much a manifestation of his discussion on the subject in this novel. Another major part of the book that deals with this relationship is the continual retelling of the unnamed narrator's creation story. The tale is begun again and again in order to "get it right" (GGRW, 14) because "it's best not to make them [mistakes] with stories" (GGRW, 14). This emphasis on "get[ting] it right" implies that there are correct and incorrect ways to tell the story. The narrator has a goal which he or she is working towards, but King is careful to let the reader know that the process of retelling this story, of attempting to tell it in a way which conveys truth or "how it happened," (GGRW 3 & 431) will continue indefinitely. The novel opens with the narrator beginning to tell Coyote the story. His/her closing line at the end of this first section is, "'That's true,' I says. 'And here's how it happened'" (GGRW, 3). The final line of the book echoes this piece of dialogue word for word and thus King leaves us almost exactly where we began. We are no closer to a complete version of this story than we were before reading the unnamed narrator's first attempt. The story continues on, but that does not mean the portions of it King presents in this novel are in any way incomplete. The value of this story does not lie in its ending, but in the telling of it. Those readers who have engaged with King, however, have grappled with the difficult questions he poses and have learned much from that struggle.

Fiction is important to King not only because he is a writer, but because he recognizes stories as indirect guides on a search for truth and the power they have as such. King

also seems to believe that the dangers of fixity are most imminent when people construct, believe in, and propagate or institutionalize false absolutes as truth. I have mentioned in my introduction that, in his essay "Godzilla vs. Post-Colonial" King refuses to accept post-colonialism as an adequate descriptor for Native Canadian literature. He feels that the term homogenizes both Native authors and their texts. Moreover, such a focus tends to fix Native Canadians in the role of victims of colonization which is entirely uncondusive to mounting any sort of opposition. An effective resistance strategy not only exposes or raises awareness about oppression, but also engages with the history of that oppression and offers alternatives for the future. Green Grass, Running Water is an example of this kind of resistance. It is not a purely reactive text, but one which provides its audience with an exploration of Native Canadian subjects who are struggling in their current situations and are not ahistoricized or idealized. As a number of critics have astutely noted, one of the elements which makes this novel particularly strong is King's ability to effectively translate aspects of Native oral traditions into written form. In doing so, he asserts the inherent value of those Native cultures.

Another way in which King attains this balance is through the use of humour. He employs a significant amount of humour in this novel which is at once good natured fun and scathing satire. The stories of First Woman, Changing Woman, Thought Woman and Old Woman play mercilessly with both biblical narratives and secular canonical literary works. Of these, the tale most directly relevant to my purposes is the

unnamed narrator's story of Changing Woman's encounter with the Pequod. When she boards the ship, Changing Woman accepts Queequeg's name, as he is apparently not on board, and Ahab attempts to enlist her in his whale hunt. Despite sufficient evidence to the contrary, once a lone whale is sighted Ahab insists "It's Moby-Dick, ... the great white whale" (GGRW, 197). The others, however, have questions:

Begging your pardon, says one of the crew. But isn't that whale black?  
 Throw that man overboard, says Ahab.  
 Begging your pardon again, says another one of the crew. But isn't that whale female?  
 Throw that man overboard, too, says Ahab. ...  
 Moby-Jane! the crew yells. The Great Black Whale!  
 Throw everybody overboard, shouts Ahab.  
 Call me Ishmael, says Ishmael, and all the crew jumps into the boats and rows away.  
 This could be a problem, says Ahab. (GGRW, 197)

Captain Ahab here, like other supposedly authoritative figures in King's novel, is painted in a foolish light. His overzealous, dictatorial behaviour divests him of the crew he requires to successfully complete his quest. King has his reasons, I believe, for such a portrayal.

On one level, transforming Ahab from a tragic to a comic figure is a subversive tactic. Playing with the central texts of a dominating culture, as King does, can be an important component of resistance to domination, cultural or otherwise. Parody does play a role in undermining authority, and adding previously disregarded perspectives to an accepted historical narrative is obviously important. These actions, however, cannot necessarily stand on their own as effective resistance strategies. King might say, given his stance in "Godzilla vs. Post-colonial," that if there is only parody,

then it is not really a resistant act. It is only a reaction to domination instead of an assertion of identity. Harlow explains that "[t]he struggle [of the colonized subject] is one which engages the traditional past as well as the present circumstances of western hegemony in order to determine future coordinates of social and political formations and strategic alliances" (Harlow, 20). Harlow writes of the necessity of engaging with current western hegemony, but her assertion is applicable to engagement with canonical western literature as well. In part, this is what King is doing with his intertextual references to Melville. I am suggesting that what King sees in Melville's work are a number of ideas which are very similar to some of his own.

The unnamed narrator's version of Moby-Dick is amusing and its humour is intentionally subversive. However, as I have previously mentioned, the version of Ahab in *Changing Woman's* adventure is not the only incarnation of Melville's melancholy captain that occurs in the novel. King's parody is not straightforward and King is not unmindful that he himself is subject to the same scrutiny with which he demands others regard Melville. I would suggest that this brief reference to Melville's epic tale is a very deliberate misrepresentation of the novel. One possible reason for King's choice is that by reducing Moby-Dick in the way he does and then subjecting it to such a degree of mockery, he turns the tables on centuries of misrepresentations of Native cultures. He effectively demonstrates what it is like to have some of the most important thoughts and ideas in one's culture reduced to a humorous anecdotal footnote in somebody else's story. King, however, also problematizes his own

parody. One of the exchanges between Coyote and the narrator which appears in this section is sparked by a disruptive interjection of Coyote's into the story. The conversation is as follows:

'My favourite month is April,' says Coyote.  
 'That's nice,' I says.  
 'I also like July,' says Coyote.  
 'We can't hear what's happening if you keep talking,' I says.  
 'I don't care much for November,' says Coyote.  
 'Forget November,' I says. 'Pay attention.'  
 (GGRW, 195)

We then return immediately to the narrator's story wherein Ahab demands that Changing Woman "Pay attention....Keep watching for whales" (GGRW, 195). The narrator and Ahab, who at first glance in this version of the story is characterized as little more than a tyrannical fool, are both using the same discourse, a point King emphasizes with the immediate juxtaposition. The attempt to exert control over others, to direct them in ways that suit one's own agenda, is not a phenomenon which is the exclusive property of dominant groups just as what might be deemed a politically incorrect scenario in literature is not always malevolent in nature. King is having some fun at the expense of Moby-Dick, but there is a serious examination going on as well. The connection King makes between Eli and Ahab engages with Melville's novel in a slightly different way.

There are other characters in this novel that King plays with in the same manner as he does the version of Ahab in his unnamed narrator's recurring creation story. The police Sergeant who is investigating the apparent disappearance of the four Old Indians from Dr. Hovaugh's psychiatric hospital

is an example of this kind of portrayal, a character who belongs to the novel's 'real' time and space. Sergeant Ben Cereno and his officer, Jimmy Delano, are references to Melville's short story, "Benito Cereno" (Flick, 145-6) In Green Grass, Running Water, King's version of Melville's Cereno is, like his Ahab, also portrayed as a foolishly dictatorial authority figure. The Sergeant expects deferential behaviour from King's female incarnation of Melville's mutinous slave leader, Babo, when he questions her regarding the Indians' disappearance. She, like Changing Woman, however, does not fully comply with what she is expected to do.

The relationship between truth and stories is an important one for Melville as well as King. Melville points to Shakespeare, a writer of plays, as a purveyor of truth, however indirect and fragmented that truth must necessarily appear. In a letter to Hawthorne regarding Moby-Dick Melville writes,

Shall I send you a fin of the 'Whale' by way of a specimen mouthful? The tail is not yet cooked, though the hell-fire in which the whole book is broiled might not unreasonably have cooked it ere this. This is the book's motto (the secret one), Ego non baptiso to in nomine -- but make out the rest yourself.  
("29 June," 2218)

It seems that Melville has a playful side as well. He leaves hints for Hawthorne, but refuses to disclose the meaning of the novel. Perhaps it is "Always best to figure those things out for yourself" (GGRW, 422). Melville does, of course, examine the nature of fiction and its relationship to truth in more serious ways as well. At this point it is important to examine an instance where Melville treats this topic

because of the extent to which King picks up his discussion in Green Grass, Running Water. Since King spends a significant amount of time with Melville's short story "Benito Cereno," this text seems an apt one to discuss.

In "Benito Cereno" Melville explores some important questions related to this subject in a more political and less metaphysical arena. Captain Delano must determine what has happened aboard a ship he comes upon by chance, and he must do so by listening to accounts from the vessel's crew and by reading a series of strange clues which contradict those accounts. The vessel's tale is told initially when Delano boards her, and then retold partially in varying degrees of detail throughout the story. Like the creation story in King's novel, this tale must be told time and time again because the listener (Delano in Melville and Coyote in King) has not yet figured out a solution to his particular conundrum. During the course of his investigation Delano happens upon

an aged sailor seated cross legged near the main hatchway.... His hands were full of ropes which he was working into a large knot.... Captain Delano crossed over to him, and stood in silence surveying the knot; his mind, by a not uncongenial transition, passing from its own entanglements to that of the hemp. For intricacy such a knot he had never seen in an American ship, or indeed any other. The old man looked like an Egyptian priest, making gordian knots for the temple of Ammon. ...At last, puzzled to comprehend the meaning of such a knot, Captain Delano addressed the knoter: --

'What are you knotting there, my man?'

'The knot,' was the brief reply, without looking up.

'So it seems; but what is it for?'

'For someone else to undo' ("Cereno," 2522)

This passage is an important comment on the rest of the

story. It reflects the fact that Delano has yet to unravel the riddle of Benito Cereno's mysterious ship. Try as he might, Delano cannot look past his own biases and read the subtext of the tale with which he has been presented. Similarly, a number of the white characters in Green Grass, Running Water, such as Sifton, Bill Bursum and George Morningstar, cannot see far enough beyond their stereotypical views of Native Canadians to develop any significant understanding of them. The passage about the knoter and, I would argue, King's constant attempts at debunking stereotypes, are also of great importance because of the larger statement they make about truth.

As readers, we wade through Delano's puzzle alongside him, but we are also challenged by Melville, as we are by King, to think about whether locating absolute truth is indeed a possibility. In the mythological account it was prophesied that the Gordian knot<sup>4</sup> would be undone by the person who was to become the "lord of all Asia" (Bulfinch, 48). The knot, though, was never technically undone. After other men had made countless attempts, Alexander the Great simply severed the troublesome knot with his sword. On one hand, Alexander's answer exactly befitted a man who would let nothing stand in the way of his conquering the Asian

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas Bulfinch records in in his famous collection of ancient myths that

Midas was the King of Phrygia. He was the son of Gordius, a poor countryman, who was taken by the people and made king, in obedience to the command of the oracle, which had said that their future king should come in a wagon. While the people were deliberating, Gordius with his wife and son came driving his wagon into the public square. Gordius, being made king dedicated his wagon to the deity of the oracle, and tied it up in its place with a fast knot. (Bulfinch, 48)



continent, but on the other, he completely circumvented the difficulties involved in the contest. Melville, however, does not profess that truth does not exist, merely that in its entirety it may be beyond the scope of conventional human understanding. Again regarding Shakespeare he writes:

But it is those deep far-away things in him; those occasional flashingsforth of the intuitive Truth in him; those short, quick probings at the very axis of reality: -- these are the things that make Shakespeare, Shakespeare. ("Mosses," 2205)

There is truth, but it is buried deep. It inhabits a different plane to which the majority of readers are denied direct access. Although Melville credits Shakespeare with understanding truth or reality, his language in this passage suggests that Shakespeare is not so much possessed of truth as by it. Truth is inside of Shakespeare, but decidedly separate from him, and when it emerges, in short and brilliant bursts, it seems to come at least partially of its own accord. Melville's use of the word 'intuitive' implies that Shakespeare was able to apprehend truth without subjecting himself to the arduous journey most others must face. Thus Melville can say Shakespeare knows truth and still ask whether truth can be found by those who seek it. Like Alexander, Shakespeare is great, but he has not necessarily adhered to the rules of the challenge.

Shakespeare's struggle lies in not being able to convey the truth he knows directly; he must speak it in parable. Melville also notes that, intriguingly, Shakespeare's "quick probings at the very axis of reality" are dangerous ("Mosses," 2205). They come

Through the mouths of the dark characters of Hamlet, Timon, Lear, and Iago, he craftily says, or sometimes insinuates the things, which we feel to be so terrifically true, that it were all but madness for any good man, in his own proper character, to utter, or even hint of them. Tormented into desperation, Lear the frantic King tears off the mask, and speaks the sane madness of vital truth. ("Mosses," 2205)

Truth must be conveyed indirectly not only because it is difficult to comprehend, but because in its entirety, it is terrifying. That truth or truths cannot be obtained by any direct means, and perhaps not at all, is an idea I have mentioned that King endorses within Green Grass, Running Water.

To return to Captain Delano and his troubles, Melville spends a good deal of time in "Benito Cereno" probing the difficulties of locating particular truths. While Delano waits aboard the Spanish ship for his crewman to return with an adequate fresh water supply his initial suspicions about the vessel plague him continually. As the day wears on it seems that each time he notices something new amiss, he first attributes it to Cereno's ill intentions towards him and then convinces himself of his error. Watching the odd behaviour of a sailor, Delano's mind begins to wander:

From something suddenly suggested by the man's air, the mad idea now darted into Captain Delano's mind, that Don Benito's plea of indisposition, in withdrawing below, was but a pretence: that he was engaged there maturing some plot, of which the sailor, by some means gaining and inkling, had a mind to warn the stranger against; incited, it may be, by gratitude for a kind word on first boarding the ship. ("Cereno," 2521)

Conclusions about Cereno's purposes being nefarious in nature appear to leap easily to mind. They seem to dissipate as

easily. Shortly following the above passage, Delano thinks to himself:

What a donkey I was. This kind gentleman who here sends me his kind compliments, he but ten minutes ago, dark-lantern in hand, was dodging round some old grindstone in the hold, sharpening a hatchet for me, I thought. Well, well; these long calms have a morbid effect on the mind,...("Cereno," 2523)

Ironically, as we later learn but already suspect, it is Babo, not Cereno, who is plotting against Delano, and what insidiousness Delano senses aboard the vessel stems from attempts to disguise the mutiny.

Try as he might, Delano cannot untangle the ship's mysteries because he falls irretrievably into the slave leader's trap. The scenario Babo constructs is brilliant as it plays directly upon Delano's biases. Delano is close, at some points, to discovering the real dynamic operating on the ship, but believes the blacks "too stupid" to hatch an effective plot. He repeatedly speaks of the blacks in terms alarming to most current sensibilities ("Cereno," 2521). As Delano takes notice of the female slaves, the narrator notes that "He was gratified with their manners; like most uncivilized women, they seemed at once tender of heart and tough of constitution....Unsophisticated as leopardesses; loving as doves" ("Cereno," 2519). By equating the women with animals, Delano definitively demonstrates his view that blacks are less than human, and he is gratified because what he sees fulfill his expectations. Native Canadians also have largely been perceived by Euro-Canadians as savage or subhuman and King's use of "Benito Cereno" is, in part, an indirect reminder of this tendency. Delano's attitude is a

debilitating blind spot which Babo capitalizes on masterfully. He chooses to disguise himself in the role of the faithful manservant and because this behaviour falls into the parameters Delano has outlined for blacks, he does not think to suspect Babo's intentions towards either himself or Cereno. On Babo's conduct Delano remarks, "Faithful fellow!.... Don Benito, I envy you such a friend; slave I cannot call him" ("Cereno," 2507). Fixed concepts of identity can be very misleading. The only moments at which Delano appears the least bit uneasy about Babo's behaviour are those when the slave seems to overstep the boundaries of his role: "Somewhat annoyed by these [Babo's] conversational familiarities, Captain Delano turned curiously upon the attendant, then glanced inquiringly at his master; but, as if long wonted to these little informalities, neither master nor man seemed to understand him" ("Cereno," 2511). Caught in an intricate web of social gestures and hierarchical constructs, the reality Delano perceives remains flawed and perhaps irrevocably so.

King exhibits a similar distrust of all neat and tidy ideas which through constant repetition have come to masquerade as truths. His search for truth drives him to perpetually trouble binary oppositions of all sorts because truth exists outside of carefully constructed boundaries between both people and their perceptions of the world. As I have demonstrated in the introduction, critics of Green Grass, Running Water choose to emphasize different binary oppositions or borders clearly dividing one thing from another which King addresses within the text. Bailey looks at the contrast between oral and written literatures, Goldman

examines Native versus non-Native cultural mapping strategies present in the novel and Lamont-Stewart focuses on the complication of gender stereotypes. In King's interview with Andrews, however, he explains that he is concerned with breaking down all borders, including metaphysical ones such as the boundary between fantasy and reality. He is also aware of the difficulties this task presents. Peters reminds us that there are definite borders which are set up in the novel and he rightly explores King's deconstruction of Native stereotypes, but it is Atwood who recognizes the ever present tension between creative and destructive forces which is such a vital part of this book. While King is breaking down borders, others are springing up in their places so the struggle is constant and, as it was with Melville, a driving force. To borrow Atwood's phrase, both King and Melville brandish their double-bladed knives with expert care.

When, at last, Delano understands that the situation aboard the Spanish vessel is a mutinous one, it is because of Cereno's final attempt at eliciting comprehension. Following this dramatic moment, Melville includes a partial record of the courtroom deposition recounting the events of the mutiny. Once Cereno's accounting of the events are set down in the official language of the judicial system, it seems fixed in place and given some measure of authority. Melville, however, undermines any notions that we or Delano have finally come to know the truth behind the San Dominick's story. Don Benito is traumatized by his experience and his persistent melancholy provokes this exchange between he and Delano:

'You are saved,' cried Captain Delano, more and more astonished and pained; 'you are saved; what has cast such a shadow upon you?'

'The negro.'

There was silence, while the moody man sat, slowly and unconsciously gathering his mantle about him, as if it were a pall. ("Cereno," 2554)

Although his deposition is recorded, Cereno knows the whole story has not been told and Babo continues to haunt him. Melville emphasizes this lack when he writes, "the black met his voiceless end. The body was burned to ashes; but for many days, the head, that hive of subtlety, fixed on a pole in the Plaza, met, unabashed, the gaze of the whites..." ("Cereno," 2554). What is missing from the official account of the mutiny are indications that Babo's actions may have been justified. The mutiny's leader may represent, in part, some awful truths about the nature of slavery. Delano is untroubled; he slots Babo into the tidy category of villain and continues on his way. Cereno, however, is severely disturbed by what he is forced to begin to confront during the violence aboard the ship. Even after Babo is executed, his gaze continues to challenge people to confront truth.

Melville makes an important contribution to discussions regarding the nature of truth. Indeed, the skepticism in his work is pervasive. Although he often despairs, he never falls into mere nihilism. Hawthorne writes in his journal of a visit Melville paid him:

Melville, as he always does, began to reason of Providence and futurity, and of everything that lies beyond human ken, and informed me that he had 'pretty much made up his mind to be annihilated'; but still he does not seem to rest in that anticipation; and, I think, will never rest until he gets hold of a definite belief. ... He can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief; and he is too honest and courageous not

to try to do one or the other. (Hawthorne, 1394)

While Melville is suspicious of what people call truth, he does not appear to believe that there is no such thing. Given the integral role the search for truth plays in works like "Benito Cereno" and Moby-Dick, King's references to Melville are not made simply in passing. King's constant investigation of the problem of truth is every bit as rigorous as Melville's. This relentless questioning takes many diverse forms from multiple perspectives on a single event, to parody. The resonance with Melville in King's text is both an engagement with Melville's discussion of truth and an extension of his own project of breaking down barriers. In King's case, it is the barrier between Native and conventionally canonical fiction. King's discussion of truth bears directly on issues of authority which I will examine in the following chapter.

The Importance of "Benito Cereno" for  
Green Grass, Running Water

The challenge which issues from Babo's peerless gaze in the final lines of "Benito Cereno" demands that readers consider a number of difficult and important questions. Some of these queries concern the nature of truth while others explore problems of authority. Among the sorts of questions Melville asks indirectly throughout his short work of fiction are: How is authority constructed? Is authority an illusion? What are the implications of authority misused? Who actually holds power and how easy or difficult is it to effect shifts in the possession of that power? King asks many of the same questions in Green Grass, Running Water and references to Melville's work pepper that inquiry. The way in which King intentionally points to Melville with respect to these issues makes the Melvillean references central to any discussion of King and authority. And, to determine what King is doing when he draws Melville into a conversation about authority, we must know a little of the latter's position on the subject.

Of substantial importance for King's novel is the vehicle Melville chooses for these queries. Slavery was one of the most hotly contested issues of his day. In Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination, Toni Morrison explores some of the effects the presence of black slaves in America had on the work of the country's



predominantly white authors. Regarding Melville she says,

Melville uses allegorical formations - the white whale, the racially mixed crew, the black-white pairings of male couples, the questing, questioning white male captain who confronts impenetrable whiteness - to investigate and analyze hierarchic difference. Poe deploys allegorical mechanisms in Pym not to confront and explore, as Melville does ... the non-sequitur that is entailed in racial difference. (Morrison, 68-9)

The impulse to explore racial difference Morrison marks with reference to Moby-Dick is also present in Melville's other work. Carolyn L. Karcher notes that questions about race exist in Omoo, Mardi and "Benito Cereno" as well (Karcher, 2442-3).

When he was writing in the 1850's, Melville's America was inundated with arguments on either side of the increasingly heated slavery debates. The Civil War loomed only a few years in the future and Melville's sympathies, it has been noted, lay with the abolitionists. According to Karcher,

Melville's roving life as a sailor, which provided the material for his first six books, also schooled his imagination. Exposed to brutal working conditions alongside men of all races, Melville learned to identify with slaves and to draw analogies between different forms of oppression. (Karcher, 2441)

Such sympathies, not surprisingly, found expression in his literary endeavours. "Benito Cereno" is, among other things, arguably the culmination of Melville's efforts in this respect. As mentioned above, the story contains a commentary on slavery. To make this criticism Melville employs an interesting strategy; he uses "an obtuse observer representing the class of 'gentlemen'" (Karcher, 2443):

Mouthing their racist clichés, mimicking their social snobbery, echoing their pious platitudes and exposing their sublime obliviousness to the suffering on which they fattened, Melville mercilessly anatomized the readers he had given up hope of converting. Yet he also jarred them out of their complacency through language that persistently provoked discomfort. (Karcher, 2443)

Readers are told the story of "Benito Cereno" through Captain Delano's markedly limited perspective, but they are meant to see beyond it. He is an ironic narrator and Melville intends to expose how constraining the American captain's biases are. Viewing the world as he does, Delano cannot discern the reality of the situation aboard the San Dominick. Readers, however, are given a chance both to understand the situation ahead of Delano and to realize his shortcomings.

Implicit in Melville's virulent critique of slavery are questions regarding the assumptions of superiority and authority which are responsible for the institution. He undermines these assumptions by both exposing Delano's self-blinding prejudices, which make the captain look foolish indeed, and demonstrating the agency of the slaves. They do not remain victims here, but plot and successfully execute, until Delano's intervention of course, a violent mutiny. Also, while describing the condition of the San Dominick, the narrator of "Benito Cereno" notes that, "Her keel seemed laid, her ribs put together, and she launched, from Ezekiel's Valley of Dry Bones" ("Cereno", 2500). A footnote to this text in the Heath Anthology of American Literature states that "The Biblical allusion suggests an analogy between the Israelites and the African slaves ... as captive nations seeking to be restored to their homeland" ("Cereno", 2500). The equation of Africans with the Judeo-Christian God's

chosen people has important implications. Murdered Spaniards, however, are numerous, as we learn in the deposition which closes the story, and Don Benito Cereno's suffering, which does provoke an empathetic response, is readily apparent. Melville does not necessarily justify the actions of the slaves, although he seems to challenge the notion that such recourses are entirely unjustifiable. By deliberately demonstrating the complexities of the situation Melville avoids uncompromisingly valorizing the slaves and thus substituting one kind of assumed authority for another. Rather than risk being prescriptive, he leaves the reader to take up Babo's challenge.

Throughout "Benito Cereno," Melville examines authority as a construct. When Captain Amasa Delano boards her, the San Dominick is transformed into a theatre complete with a host of costumes and props. Eying one of the Spanish sailors, Delano inquires internally, "What was that which so sparkled? ... It was no lamp -- no match -- no live coal. Could it have been a jewel? But how come sailors with jewels? -- or with silk-trimmed under-shirts either?" ("Cereno", 2515). Of course some of the Spanish sailors are not sailors at all, but administrators and passengers who have disguised themselves as such. Delano has glimpsed behind the costume, but does not have enough information to recognize what he has seen. Also, during Delano's initial observation of Don Benito's costume, the American notices a sword which he deems is "more for utility than ornament" ("Cereno", 2507). As he learns afterwards, however:

The dress, so precise and costly ... had not willingly been put on. And that silver-mounted sword, apparent symbol of despotic command, was not, indeed, a sword,

but the ghost of one. The scabbard, artificially stiffened, was empty. ("Cereno", 2554)

Opposite to what Delano has assumed, the sword is more for ornament than utility. Like the scabbard, Cereno's command - his authority - is a hollow mockery. The guises are constructed well enough, however, to hoodwink Delano.

Directed by Babo, everyone, either voluntarily or under threat, contrives to act out their expertly scripted roles. Even so, the players experience some difficulties. Delano "mark[s] the noisy indocility of the blacks in general, as well as what seemed the sullen inefficiency of the whites..." ("Cereno", 2503). Although the Captain ultimately gleans nothing from these and other similar observations, he draws our attention to the gaps in the performance. As the story progresses, the mistakes become more difficult for Delano to believably or even satisfactorily explain away:

Three black boys, with two Spanish boys, were sitting together on the hatches, scraping a rude wooden platter, in which some scanty mess has recently been cooked. Suddenly, one of the black boys, enraged at a word dropped by one of his white companions, seized a knife, and though called to forbear by one the the oakum-pickers, struck the lad over the head, inflicting a gash from which blood flowed. ("Cereno", 2508)

A slave undisciplined for striking a white boy, whatever the latter's class, is almost unthinkable. The scene unsettles Delano, yet he does not pursue Cereno far on the subject. Even the orchestrater of the mutiny does not give a flawless performance. A number of times during the story Delano marks "the steady good conduct of Babo" ("Cereno", 2503). Babo plays his role of the faithful manservant convincingly, brimming with humility and good will towards his master. He

is, however, well motivated to ensure Cereno's continued compliance. One of the most terrifying moments in the story occurs when Delano observes Babo shaving Cereno below deck:

...he then made a gesture as if to begin, but midway stood suspended for an instant, one hand elevating the razor, the other professionally dabbling among the bubbling suds on the Spaniard's lank neck. Not unaffected by the close sight of the gleaming steel, Don Benito nervously shuddered; ... Altogether the scene was somewhat peculiar, at least to Captain Delano, nor, as he saw the two thus postured, could he resist the vagary, that in the black he saw a headsman, and in the white, a man at the block. But this was one of those antic conceits, appearing and vanishing in a breath, from which, perhaps, the best regulated mind is not always free. ("Cereno", 2529)

Babo's ruse is so successful in part because of Captain Delano's biases. Delano believes that Spaniards are naturally superior to Africans, and is thus not inclined to question whether Cereno is actually in control. That the mutinous slaves cannot effect a thorough illusion of authority suggests that what is perceived to be real authority is equally incomplete.

Melville gives a number of indications throughout the text that Babo and the slaves are the ones who have power aboard the Spanish vessel, although it is necessarily concealed. Approaching the San Dominick, Delano observes the stern-piece, "medallioned about by groups of mythological or symbolical devices; uppermost and central of which was a dark satyr in a mask, holding his foot on the prostrate neck of a writhing figure, likewise masked" (Heath, 2500). Upon boarding the ship he also notes that "continued suffering seemed to have brought out the less good-natured qualities of the negroes, besides, at the same time, impairing the

Spaniard's authority over them" (Heath, 2502). As well, Melville presents us with the aforementioned scene wherein Babo shaves Cereno. This chilling moment imperfectly mimics the carving noted on the stern-piece at the beginning of the story. Delano also eventually learns from Cereno's deposition that Babo carried a hidden dagger on his person during Delano's stay aboard ship. The smaller, unseen weapon is capable of inflicting mortal wounds that Cereno's ineffectual showpiece cannot.

As an aspect of his exploration of authority as a construct perhaps Melville is highlighting the power of black people heretofore concealed by ignorant white assumptions of their inferiority. An organized resistance on the part of slaves could potentially deflate a hierarchical power structure based on insubstantial notions of inherent authority. Melville realizes, of course, that resistance to such an ingrained system is fraught with complications. The ending he writes, the slave revolt being quashed by the overzealous American sailors, demonstrates these difficulties. This story does not end with the slaves being victorious or even affecting Delano in any significant way; however, it does offer readers the hope that resistance to constructed authority by dominant groups can and should be pursued.

Thomas King also examines the idea of authority being a constructed thing and he makes explicit use of "Benito Cereno" in Green Grass, Running Water to do so. He creates three characters who are known by the names Babo Jones, Ben Cereno and Jimmy Delano. King's Babo is female and a member of the janitorial staff at the psychiatric hospital where the

four Old Indians usually reside. She claims a lineage that is worthy of note when she says,

'They were barbers. You know, my whole family. All the way back. They knew about hair' ...

'My great-great-grandfather was a barber on a ship. Sailed all over the place, cutting hair, shaving people.' (GGRW, 92)

The invocation of the shaving scene from "Benito Cereno" becomes even more explicit in the following exchange:

'Straight razor,' said Babo. 'It's the only thing to use. Good blade, good strop, and you can get the best shave in the world. Now, my great-great-grandfather could handle a blade. Have I got stories --' ... 'Those things are pretty dangerous, aren't they?'

Babo waved her hand. 'Nothing to it. Just practice. Got to be careful under the nose and around the neck.' (GGRW, 92)

The stories to which King refers here are the events that take place aboard the San Dominick. For added measure, the parts of the face she marks as requiring extra caution are the only ones Don Benito Cereno has shaved in Melville's tale. In doing so she reminds readers, in a manner which seems outwardly playful but inwardly very serious, of her ability to upset authority and to become dangerous.

There are a number of other notable similarities between Melville's Babo and King's. Although the character in Green Grass, Running Water is not a slave, the novel being set in the early 1990's, King makes a direct connection between his Babo and the apparently not so distant institution of slavery. A curious piece of dialogue occurs as Ms. Jones and Dr. Hovaugh cross the border into Canada. The Canadian border guard asks,

'Are you bringing anything into Canada that you plan to sell or leave as a gift?' ...  
 'Nothing,' said Dr. Hovaugh.  
 'What about her?' said the guard.  
 'She's with me.'  
 'Nonetheless, you'll have to register her,' said the guard.  
 'I see,' said Dr. Hovaugh.  
 'All personal property has to be registered.'  
 (GGRW, 237)

The guard's reference to Babo as Dr. Hovaugh's property suggests, ironically, that the Canadian government's understanding of human rights issues is entirely antiquated. This conversation may seem absurd considering how long ago slavery laws were repealed, but King is commenting, I believe, on how little the situation for Native Canadians has improved since that occurred.

Although it is not identical, the relationship between King's Babo and his Cereno, the police Sergeant investigating the disappearance of the Old Indians, bears a significant resemblance to the one between their namesakes in Melville's story. The leader of the mutiny takes on the role of manservant as part of an elaborate ruse. From this position he is able to carefully regulate the actions of the man who is supposed to be in control. Unlike Don Benito, King's Cereno has illusions about the extent of his own authority. The interview between the police Sergeant and Ms. Jones commences as follows:

'Well, Mrs. Jones. Pretty busy morning. You been working here long?'  
 'Ms.'  
 'What?'  
 'Ms. Jones. I'm not married.'  
 Sergeant Cereno smiled and tapped the tips of his fingers together. 'Right. How long have you been working here, Miss Jones?'



'Ms. I've got four kids.'  
 'Right. How long have you been working here?'  
 'Sixteen years.'  
 'Sergeant Cereno.'  
 'What?'  
 'Sixteen years, Sergeant Cereno.'  
 'You're kidding.'  
 'This is a serious matter, Ms. Jones.'  
 'You can call me Babo.' (GGRW, 23-4)

The Sergeant seems incensed at Babo's correction and must remind her of the importance of his position. Babo, however, subverts this authority. Sergeant Cereno is attempting to conduct an official investigation into the disappearance of the four Old Indians, but the directions in which Babo steers the conversation are distinctly less formal. She also, much to the annoyance of the Sergeant, attempts to ask him some questions. Babo does eventually provide answers to the majority of the queries that Sergeant Cereno makes, so in some ways, like the slaves on the San Dominick, her attempt at subverting authority is not completely successful. The slave mutiny in Melville's story does not outlast its discovery by the Americans, but even the thwarted attempt at freedom makes a powerful statement. Similarly, King's Babo's efforts are not entirely in vain because she never lets Sergeant Cereno have total control of the situation.

Cereno's direct manner and his brisk attempt to dismiss Babo's comments emphasizes both the impersonality and the inflexibility of the authoritative institution that he represents. King depicts the procedure to which the Sergeant clings as a static or fixed thing unwilling or incapable to accommodate difference. Sergeant Cereno appears unable to acknowledge Babo as a person within the strictly delineated

boundaries of his investigation and his patience. It is important, I believe, that one of the topics Babo attempts to discuss and Cereno clumsily tries to evade, is the origin of her name. By discussing her ancestors as she does, Babo denies that she and they are insubstantial, ahistorical figures, a fact that the Sergeant's brand of constructed authority cannot acknowledge if it is to perpetuate an illusion of power. Eventually Cereno becomes frustrated and hands the questioning of Babo over to his colleague. While maintaining an apparently innocuous and even cheerful tone, Babo is able to deflate Cereno with her insistence on asserting herself. Although her intentions are not violent like those of Melville's character, she is subversive all the same. Immediately prior to the Sergeant's departure King writes,

Cereno stood up and walked to the door. 'Jimmy,' he said in a loud voice, 'put in a new cassette and make sure you mark the old one. And take good care of Ms. Jones.' Then Cereno leaned in, his back to Babo, his mouth close to Jimmy's cheek.

'Enough of this dog and pony show,' he said in a whisper. 'I'm going to see the doctor.' Cereno's voice was low and hard. 'You finish up with Aunt Jemima.'  
(GGRW, 54)

Despite Sergeant Cereno's attempt to be covert, however, Babo hears the second part of his utterance to Delano and responds by saying, "Take your time .... Can't remember how to start the story anyway" (GGRW, 54). She hears the comment Cereno does not intend her to and she lets him know that she has heard it, but she does not pursue the issue. Like Melville's Babo, she undercuts authority under the guise of almost over exaggerated jovial and accommodative behaviour.

There are two more marked differences between Melville's

characters and King's renderings of them. Readers are privy to the internal thought of the latter by way of the narrator and, although there are attempts to silence her, King's Babo is able to relate at least part of her story directly. The situation of blacks in the Americas has indeed progressed since Melville's time. As King intimates, however, it still requires improvements.

I would suggest that one of King's purposes in including Babo in his novel and invoking one of Melville's treatments of the slavery question is to draw parallels between the historic difficulties of black people in the United States and the problems faced by Native Peoples in Canada. The situation of American blacks is well documented and widely known while until very recently, the problems of Native Canadians have been largely removed from public concern.<sup>5</sup> By making the latter situation analogous to the former, King makes the addressing of Native concerns an imperative. This tactic is not unprecedented in the Native Canadian struggle for recognition. In the late 1980s, Chief Louis Stevenson of the Peguis band,

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<sup>5</sup> This particular story of Melville's may not be as widely known as his other work, but King declares:

I wanted people to understand that I think Native history is as common as Jacques Cartier arriving in Canada. In a number of my books editors have asked me to gloss terms or events so the reader understands what's happening. I've refused to do that. Because what it does is it 'others' that text, like the language, that Cherokee language in Green Grass. In Truth and Bright Water the editors kept saying, couldn't we asterisk it? Put it down at the bottom? I said no. If they want to know they can ask me and I'll tell them. It's not a secret. (Andrews, 180-1)

If a reference is not immediately at the fingertips of his readership, this does not mean King does not invest it with meaning.

contacted the South African Embassy in Ottawa and invited the ambassador to visit the Peguis reserve.... Stevenson knew the national and international media would flock to Peguis to cover such a controversial visit.... Above all, Stevenson knew the ambassador's visit would raise some uncomfortable questions about the parallels between the treatment of Indians in Canada and the treatment of blacks in South Africa. (York, 229)

Geoffrey York goes on to say that Stevenson's demonstration had the desired effect, and King's comparison is equally effective.

The question of whether such an analogy can be legitimately drawn between two situations where the circumstances are definitely different has been answered affirmatively by a range of sources. Although Franz Fanon, celebrated in part for his psychological work with colonized Algerians, writes from a specific context, his work can be applied to the Canadian situation for a number of reasons. Ato Sekyi-Otu speaks of Fanon's "habit ... of enlarging the symbolic territory of ethnic codes to encompass the story of the 'nation's being'" (Sekyi-Otu, 39). By enlarging the symbolic, Sekyi-Otu says, Fanon intends that cultural symbols should not necessarily remain the exclusive property of the culture in which they originated. Fanon, sometimes called a purveyor of a new Humanism, believes that specific symbols can have universal implications. In the second chapter of Black Skin White Masks Fanon himself directly validates such uses of his work when he writes,

I will broaden the field of this description and through the Negro of the Antilles include every colonized man. Every colonized people - in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality - finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is with the culture of the

mother country. (Fanon, 18)

He regards the Antillean situation as being representative of the colonial drama. Thus, Fanon would not consider transposing his theory into a Native Canadian context or drawing parallels between different oppressive situations to be unsubstantial pursuits.

Moreover, vigilant Native rights activist, writer and professor Howard Adams cites Fanon's text Wretched of the Earth in his work entitled, A Tortured People: The Politics of Colonization. He states that,

In colonization there are two distinct societies: the colonizer and the colonized. Fanon claims that it is 'A world divided into compartments, A motionless Manicheistic world. The Native is being hemmed in; apartheid is simply one form of the division.... The first thing which the Native learns is to stay in his place, and not to go beyond certain limits'. On the other side is the colonizer with his barracks, military, police, law and order. (Adams, 122)

Adams appears to embrace Fanon's recognition of oppression as a universal.

Karcher argues, it would seem, that Melville also believed that experiences of oppression were translatable into other contexts. I have previously quoted Karcher's view that "Melville learned to identify with slaves and to draw analogies between different forms of oppression" (Heath, 2441, *My italics*). Perhaps another one of the reasons King uses Melville's tale of a slave mutiny in a novel that deals with the difficulties faced by Native Canadians is that he agrees with Melville, who also expressed direct sympathy for the plight of colonized Native populations, albeit not in a North American context. Karcher asserts that because he was

confronted in the Marquesas, Tahiti, and Hawaii with warships training their guns on naked islanders, and with 'rapacious hordes of enlightened individuals' rushing to seize the 'depopulated land' from natives reduced to starving 'interloper[s]' in their own country, Melville came to view 'the white civilized man as the most ferocious animal on the face of the earth.' Above all, a sojourn among one of the peoples his society denigrated as 'savages' taught Melville to question his deepest cultural assumptions.... Melville discovered that these reputed cannibals 'deal more kindly with each other, and are more humane' than many self-professed Christians. (Heath, 2441)

King's apparent choice to engage in a dialogue with Melville in particular seems a very apt one.

Within Green Grass, Running Water I think King himself argues that the situation of American blacks and Native Canadians can be analogous. His version of Babo is very closely linked to the four Old Indians and this connection seems intended to emphasize the similarities in their respective situations as visible minorities. There is arguably no other character in the novel besides the unnamed narrator, Native and non-Native characters included, who has such an intimate knowledge of this quasi-mythical quartet of Indians. Babo has befriended them and understands that they are not dangerous. She does not see why it is necessary to keep them in the high security wing of the hospital. She also knows that they are women:

'Well, they were old. No crime in that. They didn't hurt anyone. And they were women, not men.'

'Women?'

'That's right. We used to talk, you know, life, kids, fixing the world. Stuff like that. We'd trade stories too, the Indians and me. That's what I could do, you know, tell you one of the stories they told me.'

'Are you sure?'

'Sure, there was a great one, all about how things got started, about how the world was made...'

'No. Are you sure they were women? You must be mistaken.'

'Pretty hard mistake to make. How about that story?'

'The files say the Indians were men.'

'Suit yourself,' said Babo. (GGRW, 53-4)

The hospital staff has not, in all the time the Indians have resided there, been able to see beyond the surface identities they have donned. The disguises that fooled the guards at Fort Marion, those of the Lone Ranger, Robinson Crusoe, Ishmael and Hawkeye, continue to work. The Native characters in the novel who interact with the four Old Indians do not fix their identities in the manner that Dr. Hovaugh and his associates do. Although some of them are, at times, baffled by the Old Indians and their sudden appearances and disappearances, they do not appear to be overly concerned with discovering the reason behind the mysterious behaviour. Babo's relationship with the Old Indians, however, is slightly different. Characters like Lionel, Norma and Eli largely accept the unusual behaviour of the Lone Ranger et al. Babo accepts the odd behaviour of the Old Indians as well, but she also seems to exhibit some trickster characteristics of her own.

Lamont-Stewart indicates that King alters the traditional trickster figure in all of his fiction. She also asserts that the four Old Indians, along with Coyote, all share the role of trickster figure in Green Grass, Running Water. I would like to suggest that Babo Jones also, though not necessarily in an identical manner, partially shares this designation. Gerald Vizenor's concept of the trickster is that it is a "semiotic sign in a language game" (Vizenor, 204), and a "universal 'wanderer'" (Vizenor, 206). In King's

novel, Coyote appears to fulfill Vizenor's expectations. Coyote is not a figure who possesses much depth of character as he wanders back and forth between the novel's real and mythic spaces causing trouble. King provides no motivations for Coyote's behaviour or any omniscient glimpses into his thoughts. When he speaks, he seems to react only to what has just been said, and does so much of the time by interjecting pieces of information regarding himself which have little, ultimately, to do with the situation at hand. When Coyote acts, for example when he creates the storm that is partially responsible for Eli's death, he does not appear to be invested in the consequences of his apparently random actions.

Unlike the presentation of Coyote, readers are privy to Babo's thoughts and motivations and she does not seem free to wander into the mythic sections of the novel. There are some notable similarities as well, however, between the two. Babo appears remarkably unaffected by the events that go on around her. She regards Sergeant Cereno's behaviour towards her as entertaining rather than offensive (GGRW, 220), and she and Dr. Hovaugh are in Blossom before she decides to ask why she has been brought along (GGRW, 312). Babo muses that "She could have told Dr. Hovaugh to just stay at the hospital, that sooner or later the Indians would show up, but the idea of a trip to Canada had been inviting..." (GGRW, 313). King's Babo may not be exactly like Coyote, but neither are the Old Indians, who are very much invested in the world around them and aware of the consequences of their actions. Trickster figures, both King's and traditional ones, are mutable things. The connections King makes between Babo and



the trickster figures can be partially regarded as attempts to establish issues of racism and freedom attached to the African American struggle in a Native context. There is a recognition that comparable things have happened and are happening in both situations, including constant attempts to expose the constructedness of the authority Euro-North Americans impose on both African Americans and Natives.

While they are indeed central, the direct references to "Benito Cereno" do not, of course, comprise King's entire query into the nature of authority present in Green Grass, Running Water. From the very outset, King challenges the authority of institutionalized Christianity by playing with Biblical tales and the figure of God himself. At the beginning of Green Grass, Running Water God is unwittingly created by Coyote. King's God figure begins as an intangible dream of a dog and only actually becomes God through its own presumption. First, it mixes up the letters in 'dog' to become 'god' and then loudly insists upon its own importance until it becomes GOD. GOD assumes that it is "in charge of the world" and begins to exercise the authority it has constructed for itself (GGRW, 2). In the Garden of Eden, Coyote's mixed up dream is adamant that "[t]hey can't eat my stuff" (GGRW, 41) and that "[a]ll this stuff is mine. I made it" (GGRW, 68). Like colonists bent on claiming territory in the new world, GOD is obsessed with possessing and controlling things he does not necessarily have any claim to.

Also, the four female heroes of the shifting creation stories, First Woman, Changing Woman, Thought Woman, and Old Woman, resist being cast in fixed roles by other purveyors of the 'Christian rules' whose uncompromising rigidity is

portrayed as selfish, ignorant and immature. When Old Woman meets Young Man Walking On Water, he refuses her help and then immediately lays out the "Christian rules....And the first rule is that no one can help me. The second rule is that no one can tell me anything. Third, no one is allowed to be in two places at once. Except me" (GGRW, 350). In other words, Christian rules are absolute and those persons subject to them have no input. The story goes on to tell us, however, that Young Man Walking On Water's attempt to rescue his disciples is not successful because he tries to assert authority over the boat and the waves by commanding them. Old Woman disagrees with his tactics and the following exchange occurs:

...You shouldn't shout at yell at those happy Waves. You shouldn't shout at that jolly Boat. You got to sing a song.

Sing songs to waves? says Young Man Walking On Water. Sing songs to boats? Say, did I tell you about our Christian rules?

It's a simple song, says Old Woman. And Old Woman sings her song.

Boy, says those Waves, that is one beautiful song. We feel real relaxed.

Yes, says that Boat, it sure is. Maybe I'll take a nap.

So that Boat stops rocking, and those Waves stop rising higher and higher, and everything calms down.

Hooray, says those men. We are saved.

Hooray, says Young Man Walking On Water. I have saved you.

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

Nonsense, says Young Man Walking On Water. That other person is a woman. That other person sings songs to waves. (GGRW, 351)

In this scenario, it is obvious that the person who claims the authority is not the person with all the power. To maintain the facade of his being in control, however, Young Man Walking On Water takes credit for Old Woman's actions.

Once again, authority is an illusory and constructed thing.

In Green Grass, Running Water, there are numerous variations on this narrative theme in which a character claims authority and is eventually shown to be ineffectual. Cereno, Ahab, Hovaugh, Nathaniel Bumpo, A.A. Gabriel, Noah and GOD all share a similar story to that of Young Man Walking On Water; they are outsmarted by those they are attempting to subjugate. These characters though, are all relatively harmless. King, however, writes parts of the novel where those characters invested with falsely constructed authority, by themselves or others, are definitely more sinister. There are the border guards who destroy Alberta's family dancing costumes for no discernible reason but sport. Amos is virtually helpless to counteract this spiteful display in which his family's dignity is quite literally trampled and readers are left with the understanding that the abuses of the border guard's power could potentially be much more serious. There is also George Morningstar. In some ways, he is a laughable character. The first and only time he attends the Sundance with Latisha, he spends an afternoon with the men following which she has a chat with her father:

'That man of yours is a funny guy,' Latisha's father told her. 'Got some interesting ideas.'

'Something wrong?'

'No,' said her father. 'Wouldn't say that. He helped Mrs. Potts with her tepee. Had a new way to get the pole up.'

'Did it work?'

'Nope,' said her father. 'But he was sure it would.'

'No one got hurt did they?'

'Nope,' said her father. 'But it sure was interesting'

...'That man of yours,' her father told her, 'is sure

full of questions.'

'George is inquisitive, Dad.'

'Yeah, I can see that,' her father said. 'His eyes Okay?'

'Sure, why?'

'Guess his ears work, too.' (GGRW, 337-9)

George walks into a situation of which he has no knowledge and immediately assumes control. This scene is comical, but King balances his humorous scenarios with much more serious ones. George's relationship with Latisha definitely has a darker edge. One day, George buys a jacket of which he is very proud and he comes to Latisha's restaurant to show off his purchase. Latisha is not overtly enthusiastic and George, disappointed with her response, leaves. After work, Latisha comes home to him

sitting in front of the television with Christian curled up on his lap. He still had on the jacket. Latisha hadn't even seen it coming. George turned the television off, got out of the chair as if he was getting up to get a cup of coffee, grabbed Latisha by her dress and slammed her against the wall. And before she realized what was happening, he was hitting her as hard as he could, beating her until she fell.

'Don't you ever do that again,' he kept shouting, timing the words to the blows. 'Don't you ever do that again.'

He stood over Latisha for a long time, breathing, catching his breath, his feet wide apart, his knees locked. And then he sat down in the chair and turned the television back on. (GGRW, 192)

George has assumed a position of authority in the relationship between he and Latisha and he has created rules of which she may not necessarily be aware. These rules if broken, carry dire consequences. The authority George asserts is entirely constructed, but it also has the potential to be very dangerous.

King is continually reminding readers that authority

needs to be challenged because it is a constructed thing and the people who construct it may not merit the power they bestow upon themselves. When King brings "Benito Cereno" into his narrative as directly as he does, he is asking readers to consider his examination of authority alongside Melville's.

- Conclusion -

Although the scope of this thesis does not allow for the exploration all of the subtle ways in which Thomas King's work resonates with Melville's, the ones examined here are important and demonstrate that King is employing his allusions to Melville in a very deliberate manner. In Green Grass, Running Water I think it is clear that King respects Melville both as an author and as a thinker. Melville was fairly radical in his day and King recognizes, in his allusions to him, the fact that, among other things, Melville used his work to call oppressive attitudes and practices into question. King, however, does not treat Melville's stories as static, sacred, untouchable things. He probes them and, at points, even mocks them. While King respects Melville, he does not hold that the ability to discuss such weighty issues as truth, justice, freedom, and authority in a meaningful way belongs only to established canonical authors. In initiating a dialogue with Melville through intertextual referencing, King points out how such important universal discussions are understood in a Native context.

In his novel, King represents a balance between the influence both Native and Euro-Canadian cultures have on contemporary Native Canadians. He does not hearken back to an age when Canada's indigenous peoples were uncontaminated by European influences and profess that Natives were more authentic or real prior to contact. Nor does he valorize Euro-Canadian society. Eli's sense of his own identity begins to solidify once he has spent a significant amount of time grappling with the influences he feels from both

cultures. King, it seems, makes the point that although it is possible for Natives to resist European attempts at cultural domination and erasure, to ignore the impact of colonial rule is not possible and attempts to do so are ultimately unproductive. While it is important to draw upon the past for a sense of identity, retreating into it can effectually leave cultures immobile. Engagement with the thoughts and ideas present in the literature most important to Euro-Canadian society allows Natives to assert the thoughts and ideas of their own cultures and to assert their identities as historically present and dynamic.

Another effect King achieves by incorporating Melville into his work, and thus not exclusively adhering to a more generally Native cultural sensibility, is that of unfixity. As I have mentioned, King seems to do this virtually at every turn within Green Grass, Running Water. Like Melville, he will not let the reader settle into any solid notions regarding his novel. He also refuses to define what it is that makes one white or Native or where the borders between the two cultures lie. In part, this insistence that the world is an unstable place is employed as an effective resistance strategy, debunking stereotypes that would fix Native Canadians in rigidly delineated roles.

All that being said, I do not believe that King's choice to employ Melville in particular was in any way an arbitrary one. King recognizes, as I have mentioned, that he and Melville share some remarkably similar politics and views regarding the nature of how both truth and authority function in the world in general. By engaging with Melville, King is partially able to bridge a gap between Euro-Canadian and

Native Canadian cultures. By doing so in this manner, King asserts the value of Native cultural identities. They are important not because Natives share some of the same ideas about the world as Euro-Canadians, but because there are universal elements involved in all human philosophical outlooks regardless of how different individual cultures may appear to be from each other.

The unfixity that King stresses and the blurring of borders in which he is often involved are resistance strategies which have implications for other Indigenous North American writers as well. What is it exactly that makes a work of fiction Native? King certainly acknowledges the difficulty involved in even beginning to answer such a question. While it is important to recognize the cultural distinctions which make Native writers unique, it is also important that they not be sequestered from the rest of the literary world in the name of protecting those differences. If they are so removed, they run the risk of having their work homogenized or considered as a single genre by those who have constructed the particular literary category in the first place.



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