

**'And that one takes a big bite of one of those nice red apples':  
Portraits of Native Women in Thomas King's  
Green Grass, Running Water and Medicine River**

by

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**In memory of Steven Andrew Boyd**

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## ABSTRACT

Given the multiplicity of voices and perspectives (female and male, Native and non-Native) existing in Canada, the question now is how we might collectively learn to reconcile our differences. In western culture, both gender and culture are thought to be fixed, predetermined and separate. But when viewed from a Native perspective, gender and culture are actually aspectival, rather than essential. The women in Thomas King's novels Green Grass, Running Water and Medicine River shed light on a Native world view which resists white western patriarchal assumptions about culture and gender and suggests entirely different roles for women and a new paradigm for human relationships.

In Chapter One, I explore how and why the essentialized image of the "Imaginary Indian" arose and persists in white western culture and the consequences this stereotype has for Native peoples, and Native women in particular. In Chapter Two, I examine the ways both the Native and non-Native women in GGRW and MR are marginalized by the white western culture's essential views about race and gender. The women in King's novels prove their capacity to resist racism and sexism and survive by showing their communities how to look at the world from multiple perspectives.

Chapter Three looks at the strategies Native women use not only to resist marginalization, but to re-imagine and transform the culture(s) they live in. These strategies are based on the Native practice of braiding. In the same way that different strands weave together to form a braid, culture and gender are also not individualistic (essential), but individualized (aspectival).

My conclusion will extend my discussion of Thomas King's writing to address the question of cultural difference and Native values in Canada. I will make particular reference to the current debate about Canadian immigration policy, which, rather than embracing difference, suggests that immigrants must conform to the cultural norms of the dominant society in Canada.

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## *Introduction*

### ***"But there's plenty of good stuff here. We can share it": Understanding Difference on Native Terms***

Who are you? says First Woman.  
I'm GOD, says GOD. And I am almost as good as Coyote.  
Funny, says First Woman. You remind me of a dog.  
And just so we keep things straight, says that GOD, this is  
my world and this is my garden.  
Your garden, says First Woman. You must be dreaming.  
And that one takes a big bite of one of those nice red apples.  
Don't eat my nice red apples, says that GOD.  
...  
Your apples! says First Woman, and she gives a nice red  
apple to Ahdamn.  
Yes, says that GOD, and that one waves his hands around.  
All this stuff is mine. I made it.  
New to me, says First Woman. But there's plenty of good  
stuff here. We can share it. (GGRW 68-69)

In this comic episode in Green Grass, Running Water, Thomas King intertextualizes the Genesis story of Eve's original sin and the story of First Woman to expose the difference between Native and western Christian values. In Genesis, God is omnipotent and authoritarian: He makes the rules. The Christian Eve offends God and his rules when she follows the snake's advice and eats the fruit of the tree of knowledge. As a result, Eve and Adam manage to get themselves and the whole of humanity kicked out of Paradise. But the "Eve" in King's story is First Woman, a Native woman who interprets her world on Native terms and cannot understand how GOD can think he owns this garden, or these apples. She knowingly defies GOD when she "takes a big bite of one of

those nice red apples". In fact, she doesn't even acknowledge his rules, and before that one gets the ol' divine boot, she leaves, offended by GOD's terrible manners. First Woman's reaction to GOD's inability to share his stuff reflects the difference between the Native traditions of community and personal autonomy and the authoritarian western tradition of Christian patriarchy. In western Christian tradition, the 'first woman', Eve, represents the 'weaker sex' who precipitated humanity's collective fall from grace. When Europeans colonized the Americas and imposed such views of women on Native peoples, the results were devastating. Paula Gunn Allen states that the acculturation of Native peoples "shifted us from women-centered cultures or cultures that had high respect for women to the position of... the bottom, the pits. And it gets worse and worse all the time. It's economic, it's social, it's in every kind of respect" (Winged Words 13-14).

First Woman and her sister characters (both mythic and human) in Green Grass, Running Water and Medicine River represent the kind of Native society where women are honoured for their intelligence, strength, personal autonomy and relationships with others. While Eve's actions in Genesis are divisive, the women in King's stories work to "mind their relations" and maintain the strength and cohesiveness of their communities. Thomas King explains that the concept of "minding your relations"

is at first a reminder of who we are and of our relationship with both our family and our relatives. It also reminds us of the extended relationship we share with all human beings... it is an encouragement for us to accept the responsibilities we have within this universal family by living our lives in a harmonious manner.

(All My Relations ix)



The fact that First Woman offers to share the apples with GOD is a reflection of this extended, harmonious relationship which exists amongst all living and non-living beings. Under the rubric of "minding your relations" nothing *belongs* to anyone else exclusively. The female characters in King's novels work to maintain relationships within "the universal family" by exemplifying and perpetuating these Native values and developing strategies of resistance against the western Christian patriarchal traditions and structures which have oppressed Native peoples since colonization. I will attempt to explain that in King's novels, these strategies of resistance never pit Native values directly against western values. The struggle the women in King's novels take on cannot be understood as a dialectic of opposites (Native vs. non- Native, or women vs. men), but is instead an attempt to re-vision the world in terms that make sense to "all my relations" – living and non-living, female and male, Native and non-Native.

In King's novels, the primary support for both Native women and men who are struggling to assert their Native identities is the community centered on the reserve.

King explains that

community, in a Native sense, is not simply a place or a group of people, rather, it is, as novelist Louise Erdrich describes it, a place that has been 'inhabited for generations' where 'the landscape becomes enlivened by a sense of group and family history.'.... This idea of community is not an idea that is often pursued by non-Native writers who prefer to imagine their Indians as solitary figures poised on the brink of extinction. For Native writers, community – a continuous community – is one of the primary ideas from which our literature proceeds.

(All My Relations xiv-xv)

In King's novels, the strength of the community depends a great deal on the strength of women, both in terms of their ability to "mind their relations" and to resist the oppression of western Christian patriarchy. This resistance can be personal, social, cultural and political. In GGRW, political resistance takes the form of challenging the usurpation of Native land rights. Canada's national anthem sounds, to King and his Native characters, suspiciously like: "Hosanna da, our home on Natives' land" (GGRW 270).

As King's short story "The One About Coyote Going West" suggests, the European "discovery" of Canada and the Natives who lived there was actually a huge theft:

Everyone knows who found us Indians. Eric the Lucky and that Christopher Cartier and that Jacques Columbus come along later. Those ones get lost. Float about. Walk around. Get mixed up. Ho, ho, ho, ho, those ones cry, we are lost. So we got to find them. Help them out. Feed them. Show them around. Boy, I says. Bad mistake that one.

(One Good Story, That One 69)

When Native peoples first met the Europeans, they "minded their relations", but soon discovered that they were dealing with a people who had incredibly bad manners and an entirely different moral code (a code which, apparently, could even justify the genocide of millions of Native peoples). Now, five hundred years later, it would be virtually impossible to right all the wrong done, give the land back to the Natives and vacate the premises. But the real problem is the fact that Native people have never wished to work within the western paradigm of "taking" land or "giving it back". The question of Native

land rights is not which few square metres belong to whom: it extends much further to a demand for recognition of the difference between Native and western world views and the consequently different interpretations of ownership and sharing.

Native voices must somehow be heard on terms in which they can actually be understood. Presently, the only way people seem to be able to communicate is on the terms dictated by those holding the reins of power: As Jamake Highwater notes,

I am very much alienated by the way some ideas find their way into English words. For instance, when an English word is descriptive -- like the word 'wilderness' -- I am often appalled by what is implied by the description. After all, the forest is not 'wild' in the sense that it is something needing to be tamed or controlled and harnessed. For Blackfeet Indians, the forest is the natural state of the world. It is the cities that are wild and seem to need 'taming'. (The Primal Mind 5)

King writes with an awareness of the ways both Natives and non-Natives speak and tell stories, and thus makes steps toward overcoming the kind of alienation Jamake Highwater refers to. In GGRW, the chapters begin with Cherokee syllabics and both MR and GGRW rely on narrative structures derived from oral literature. Both novels are essentially cycles of interconnecting stories, told and retold in the same way a Native storyteller might tell them. In an interview with Jace Weaver in Publisher's Weekly, King speaks enthusiastically about his own experiences listening to Native storytellers: "They're going down the line at 150 miles an hour -- and make a right turn! You're following close behind them, and you just run off the road" (56). In another interview with Jeffery Canton in paragraph, King adds that "oral stories taught me a little about

repetition and the kind of cadences that you can create in a written piece of work that you normally only think of as associated with poetry" (4). Yet at the same time, King notes that he also relies on non-Native narrative strategies to give structure to his writing.

When he writes about relationships in his novels, he asks himself:

How are those relationships established? How are they pushed forward throughout the story? Is there an adversarial relationship between the major elements and the major characters? Are there regular climaxes in those oral stories that you see in contemporary European-North American literature? And the answer to some of those questions is 'no'. (4)

In the same way that Native methods of speaking and values of community and "minding your relations" are not recognized or understood by the dominant white culture, the Native perspective on gender is also virtually excluded from western discourse. In Woman, Native, Other, Trinh T. Minh Ha discusses the notion of a "*different* distribution of sexual difference," which exists in non-western cultures and which is therefore a "challenge to the notion of (sexual) identity as commonly defined in the

West and the entire gamut of concepts that ensues.... In other words, sexual difference has no absolute value and is interior to the praxis of every subject. What is known as the 'phallic principle' in one part of the world does not necessarily apply to the other parts" (103).

Through their struggles in GGRW and MR, the women in Thomas King's novels shed light on a Native world view which suggests entirely different roles for women and a new kind of paradigm for human relationships.

Given the multiplicity of voices and world views (female and male, Native and non-Native, white and non-white) existing in Canada, the question now is how we might collectively learn to reconcile our differences. In Strange Multiplicity: Constitutionalism in an Age of Diversity, James Tully tries to answer the questions: "Can a modern constitution recognize and accommodate cultural diversity? ...[and] what is the critical attitude or *spirit* in which justice can be rendered to the demands for cultural recognition?" (1). Tully points out that although "modern societies have begun to be called 'multicultural'", there is still "no agreement on what difference this makes to the prevailing understanding of a constitutional society" (2). Such demands for cultural recognition, Tully states, are statements against the injustice of an alien form of rule and aspirations for appropriate self-government. But demands for cultural recognition and self-government need not extend to the assumptions that the resulting governments should form nations, and nations should be recognized as states (2). Tully blames such assumptions on the mis-identification of the phenomenon of cultural diversity itself. When we try to understand a "culture", Tully explains, we think of it like a "billiard ball": a "separate, bounded and internally uniform" entity (10). The "billiard ball" concept describes the view that cultures are static, remote and unaffected by contact with other cultures.

In The Imaginary Indian, Daniel Francis explores the effects this western "billiard ball" concept has had on Native culture. Francis would support Tully's explanation that essentially, the dominant white western class has attempted to bring "the overlapping cultural diversity" of Native peoples "in line with the norm of one nation, one state" (10).

In Chapter One, I will explore the reasons why this "billiard ball" image of the "Imaginary Indian" arose and still persists in western culture and the consequences it has for Native peoples, and Native women in particular.

Tully explains that this "billiard ball" concept of culture needs to be replaced with the view of cultures as "overlapping, interactive and internally negotiated" (10). He suggests that the term "multicultural" be replaced with the term "intercultural" to explain the dense interdependence of cultures: "cultures are not internally homogenous. They are continuously contested, imagined, and reimagined, transformed and negotiated, both by their members and through their interaction with other. The identity, and so the meaning, of any culture is thus aspectival rather than essential" (11).

Not only has the idea of culture been essentialized in the west, but the western concept of gender also looks like a billiard ball. In the western tradition, gender, like culture, is thought to be fixed, predetermined, and separate. But gender, like culture, is actually aspectival, rather than essential. Like cultural identities, gender identities are constantly overlapping, transforming and interacting with both each other and themselves. Not only are identities *intercultural* and *intergendered* because they interact with other cultures and genders, they are also *intracultural* and *intragendered* because they interact with themselves. Tully explains that "the experience of otherness is internal to one's own identity" (13). In Thresholds of Difference, Emberley writes that "the de-centering of subjectivity, the breakdown of a coherent and unified subject, has given way to a

notion of subjective heterogeneity from which subjects may be reconstituted in a process of alignment, articulated through a process of negotiating and constructing autonomous differences" (14). Julie Kristeva calls this process the *sujet en procès* (Desire in Language 135).

Both our gender and our cultural identities are *en procès*, and their definition is dependent on their interaction with both themselves and others. This process, King suggests, is natural. The communities in GGRW and MR are cycles of stories which are retold and revisited in every generation in the form of myths, remembering the past, old photographs, and through which the future can be re-imagined and transformed. King's refusal of narrative closure and problematization of beginnings signal this *procès*, and he describes it through his themes of family memories, procreation, sunrise and flooding. In GGRW, the four Old Indians take elaborate pains to begin the story: "'Okay,' said the Lone Ranger, 'is everybody ready?' 'Hawkeye doesn't have a nice shirt,' said Ishmael" (12). Two pages later, the Indians are still trying to get the story going: "'But you have to get it right,' said Hawkeye. 'And,' said Robinson Crusoe, 'you can't tell it all by yourself'" (14). In MR Will also has to learn to "get it right" and that you "can't tell it all by yourself" when he returns to Medicine River to sift through old family photographs and stories and receives the help of Harlen Bigbear and the whole community. The new image Will develops of himself and his past contains the faces of "all my relations".

The women in King's novels work at the heart of this process of decentering,

defining, and redefining identity as they de-essentialize views of both culture and gender. With notable exceptions such as MR's Harlen Bigbear, for the most part, King's female characters outshine the males in their ability to overthrow stereotypes and "mind their relations". In Chapter Two, I examine the ways in which in King's works both Native and non-Native women are marginalized by racism and sexism and, as MR's Rose would say, the "way things are" (252) (and have been) for women since colonization. "The way things are" for women in King's novels take forms ranging from seemingly innocuous comments about their marital status or their position in society, to painful marriages and violent domestic abuse. In Chapter Two I will show how the women in GGRW and MR determinedly resist marginalization and prove their capacity to survive.

While Chapter Two examines the strategies these Native women (and Harlen) develop to resist marginalization, Chapter Three will look at the strategies they develop not only to resist, but re-imagine and transform the culture(s) they live in. These strategies are based on the Native practise of braiding, where the strands of a braid are, as Paula Gunn Allen points out, individualized, not individualistic (Sacred Hoop 314). In the same way that different strands weave together to form a braid, the differences between cultures and genders must not be understood to be *essential*, but *aspectival*. With extraordinary creativity and humour, the women (and Harlen Bigbear) in GGRW and MR demonstrate theses principals of interdependence and "minding your relations" as they braid together Native and non-Native stories and women and men in order to re-imagine and transform the future.



As I began to research this topic, I had doubts about how I could prove that Thomas King is a "Native feminist". In fact, most critical work which addresses the question of Native women's identities concentrates on literature written by Native women. This makes perfect sense. Of course Native women should have the first word on Native women's identities. It has been difficult to find critical work which deals with the portrayal of Native women in literature written by Native men. It must be questioned how much a Native man like Thomas King able to say about Native women, and how much will be accurate. Feminist critics who approach literature written by white men about white women usually do so with a healthy amount of scepticism. Should the same scepticism be applied to a study of Thomas King's depictions of women? In fact, as I continued to work on these questions, I began to understand that King was describing both gender and culture in his novels from a Native perspective, where the divisions between male and female and Native and non-Native which we assume in western culture actually make no sense. According to this Native world view, there are no *essential* cultures or genders: what matters is the relationships between them. It means something entirely different for a Native man to write about the experiences of Native women on these terms. To call King a Native feminist is to praise him for the ways he "minds his relations".

But how can the rest of us learn to "mind our relations" and recognize cultural diversity and gender difference in this post-imperial age? Tully suggests that Native artist Bill Reid's sculpture of a black bronze canoe carrying thirteen *sghaana* (spirits or myth

creatures) from Haida mythology is "a symbol of the 'strange multiplicity' of cultural diversity that existed millennia ago and wants to be again' (18). Reid's sculpture depicts such fascinating figures as *Xuuwaji*, the part-human bear mother, *qqaaxhadajaat*, the mysterious dogfish woman, *Hlkkyaan qqusttaan*, the frog, who "symbolises the ability to cross boundaries (*xhaaidla*) between worlds" (21), and *Xuuya*, the legendary raven "the master of tricks, transformations and multiple identities" (21). The identity of the chief, or *Kilstlaai*, standing in the centre of the boat, is uncertain. Reid explains that this chief is called 'Who is he?' or 'Who is he going to be?'. I would even question here why Reid chose to call this un-named chief "he", given the Native view that gender is aspectival and not essential, and that many tribes in the Pacific Northwest were matrilineal. Each of the *sghaana* depicted in the canoe possesses an "intercultural" identity: they are constantly "*en procès*" as they change shapes, switch genders, cross boundaries, transform and interact with each other. Tully explains that Reid's 'The Spirit of Haida Gwaii' is a symbol of Native peoples' resolve to "resist and interact... [and] to rebuild and reimagine their culture; to 'celebrate their survival'" in the face of the appalling social and economic conditions Natives have experienced since colonization (21). The sculpture

is both a symbol and an inspiration of this revival and 'world reversal', as the Aboriginal peoples call it: to refuse to regard Aboriginal cultures as passive objects in an Eurocentric story of historical progress and to regard them from Aboriginal viewpoints, in interaction with European and other cultures.... it is as well an ecumenical symbol for the mutual recognition and affirmation of all cultures that respect other cultures and the earth.

(Tully 21)

I hope someday I will be able to visit the Canadian Chancery in Washington D.C. to see the original of Bill Reid's extraordinary sculpture. Tully explains that if you can

walk around the sculpture, the multiplicity of perspectives and interrelations present in the canoe seem almost to overflow. For now, I am limited to looking at the small black and white photograph Tully includes at the beginning of his text. But this one-dimensional photograph has taken on an even more fantastic dimension in my mind's eye, because it seems to me that the characters in King's writings have also taken up residence in this bronze canoe -- I can even see Coyote hanging over the gunwhales.

I believe that the characters, especially female, in King's novels are engaged in the same enterprise as Reid's *sghaana*, in the same spirit. The black canoe and King's novels take us on a journey of questioning, contesting and renegotiating cultural identities which teaches us that "things are not always as they appear -- that our habitual forms of recognition are often stultifying forms of misrecognition which need to be upset and reversed from time to time" (Tully 25).

## *Chapter One*

### ***"Guess you got to know which is which": Imaginary Indians and Blackfoot Persons***

As James Tully explains in Strange Multiplicity, the modern definition of a "multicultural" society mis-identifies the phenomenon of cultural diversity because cultures are perceived to be static, bounded and separate entities. Such perceptions marginalize those who are considered to be "different" in a society and enforce racist stereotypes. Native peoples have been facing the consequences of their "difference" since Europeans first arrived in North America.

Native North American Literature classifies Thomas King as a writer of works which address "the marginalization of Amerindians, delineate "pan-Indian" concerns and attempt to abolish common stereotypes about Native Americans" (373). In Green Grass, Running Water, Latisha's white husband George Morningstar confirms one stereotype of Natives when he turns up at the Dead Dog Cafe wearing one of the most common "symbols" of the Plains Indian: a buckskin jacket. George tells Latisha that even though "most old things are worthless," his jacket is "history" (GGRW 192). George imagines that wearing a buckskin jacket connects him with the "authentic" past, when brave and romantic Indian warriors hunted buffalo on the Plains and dusky Indian Princesses found time to sew fashionable buckskin jackets for their men around the campfire at night. George's jacket makes him feel like he can "become" Native by claiming his own affiliation with Canada's landscape and "history" through the jacket.

Latisha responds indifferently to his claim to know what real “history” is when she tells him: “Guess you got to know which is which” (192). Latisha’s statement indicates that she sees two versions of history working against each other. George’s claim that his jacket is “history” demonstrates that he cannot tell the difference between the actual history of Native peoples and the symbols and myths about Indians which have been filtered through white western consciousness since Columbus “discovered” the Americas.

George’s jacket is a symbol of what Daniel Francis calls the “Imaginary Indian”. Francis writes: “The Indian began as a White man’s mistake, and became a White man’s fantasy. Through the prism of White hopes, fears and prejudices, indigenous Americans would be seen to have lost contact with reality and to have become “Indians”; that is, anything non-Natives wanted them to be” (5). Latisha and the other women in Green Grass, Running Water and Medicine River, however, know “which is which”. The women in King’s novels work to overthrow stereotypes about Indians and assert their identities from a Native point of view. This chapter will not try to establish what is the “true” history of Native peoples, but instead will contrast the two opposing histories to try to show “which is which”. If the “Indian” is a simulation, then it is also possible to outline some alternative “simulations” which might arise from a Native-centered perspective.

Even the short description of King’s work in Native North American Literature exposes a central problem: which term should be used to identify the First Peoples of

North America? In a single entry describing King, the editors use three different terms, referring to Amerindians, 'pan-Indian concerns', and Native Americans. There are even more terms to choose from, including aboriginals, Natives, indigenous Americans, and First Nations peoples. As Daniel Francis points out in The Imaginary Indian, "what to call non-Natives is equally puzzling. White is the convenient opposite of Indian but it has obvious limitations. So, in this age of multiculturalism, does Euro-Canadian, an awkward term anyway" (9).

The struggle to find a name to identify the Native peoples of North America, and, indeed, a name to describe non-Native people as well is not just a question of semantics, but reflects the struggle to redress the marginalization of Native peoples, abolish common stereotypes, eliminate racism, and offer positive new identities for Native individuals and communities. King's writing reflects this effort to redress, rename and recreate Native people's identities. The multiplicity of names for Native peoples flows out of the efforts of writers like King to crack open the monolithic, White European, racist image of the "Indian" which has dominated Western culture since Columbus "discovered" North America. King is trying to reclaim Native peoples' right to name themselves and define their own images from within their own culture, communities and traditions. More specifically, King's female characters represent his attempt to rewrite the stereotypical image of the "Indian woman". In order to establish the effect such stereotypes have had on Native women, I will trace briefly the genesis of the image of the "Indian".

In Black Elk: The Sacred Ways of a Lakota, Wallace Black Elk writes: "You know straight across the board, hardly anybody really knows what is Indian. The word Indian in itself doesn't mean anything. That's how come nobody knows anything about Indians" (3). In an interview with Jace Weever in Publisher's Weekly (March 8, 1993) Thomas King explains that one of his goals as a Native writer is to address the kind of problem Black Elk talks about and "ask some of the really nasty questions that other writers may not want to ask or may not be in a position to ask. One of the questions that's important to ask is, 'Who is an Indian? How do we get this idea of Indianess?'" (56). In addition to these questions, I would also suggest that King is particularly interested in asking "Who is an Indian woman?"

Essentially, there was no such thing as an "Indian" until White Europeans colonized the Americas. In tracing the genesis of the image of the Indian in Fear and Temptation: The Image of the Indigene in Canadian, Australian and New Zealand Literatures, Terry Goldie explains that "the history of invasion and oppression is essential to the study, truly of essence, although the details and central events of the conquest are not major factors in the image of the indigene" (5). The crucial point is "the overwhelming fact that the oppression awarded semiotic control to the invaders, and since then the image of 'them' has been 'ours'" (5). In The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present, Robert J. Berkhofer proves the effect of the White invaders' semiotic power: "Since the original inhabitants of the Western Hemisphere neither called themselves by a single term nor understood themselves as a

collectivity, the idea and the image of the Indian must be a White conception" (3).

"Whites", Berkhofer writes, "categorized the various cultures and societies as a single entity for the purposes of description and analysis, thereby neglecting or playing down the cultural diversity of Native Americans then -- and now -- for the convenience of simplified understanding" (3).

The specific term *Indian* stems from what Berkhofer calls "the erroneous geography of Christopher Columbus" (4). Columbus believed that he had reached the Indies, so he called the peoples he met *los Indios*. He had, in fact, landed on the island of San Salvador, and the Native people he met were Arawaks. Despite the fact that the tide of Spanish colonists who followed Columbus into the "New" World came into contact with a vast diversity of aboriginal inhabitants, the fundamental concept of the "Indian" never changed. Berkhofer explains that the Spaniards applied the "twin criteria of Christianity and 'civilization'" to the peoples they met, and found the "Indian" wanting in a long list of attributes, including "letters, laws, government, clothing, arts, trade, agriculture, marriage, morals, metal goods and above all religion" (10). Not only was the "Indian" a generic concept, but there was universal agreement amongst the European colonists that these "Indians" were primitive, uncivilized, and fundamentally deficient.

This stereotype of the savage, uncivilized Indian arose, and has persisted, because Native peoples have been judged, and named, according to White European criteria. Berkhofer writes that since Europeans first arrived in the Americas, Indian life has been



described

... in terms of its lack of White ways rather than being described positively from within the framework of the specific culture under consideration. Therefore, tribal Americans were usually described not as they were in their own eyes but from the viewpoint of outsiders, who often failed to understand their ideas or customs. Images of the Indian, accordingly, were (and are) usually what he was not or had not in White terms. (26)

The term "Indian" gave rise to an image powerful and pervasive enough to eclipse the real identities of Native peoples. In semiotic terms, Terry Goldie writes, "the signifier, [the image of the Indian], does not lead back to the implied signified, the racial group usually termed Indian or Amerindian, but rather to other images" (4). The "other images" the signifier leads back to are generated exclusively from within the White European sign system, or as Berkhofer would say, "in White terms". The actual referent -- the true Native American -- has been completely excluded from the signmaking process. Terry Goldie writes, "each representation of the indigene is a signifier for which the signified is the Image. The referent has little purpose in the equation" (4).

There is a profound ambivalence at the heart of these "White terms" which judge, stereotype, marginalize and disempower Native people. The Native was cast in the role of the Other, or the antithesis of the White. The dichotomies of heathen/Christian, uncivilized/civilized, Red/White, primitive/sophisticated, amoral/moral, and inferior/superior delineated the boundary between Europeans and the Indians they set out to colonize, civilize and Christianize. Terry Goldie identifies the ambivalence at the heart of such dichotomies with his terms "fear and temptation." Goldie proposes a

chessboard metaphor to describe the relationship between the indigene and the white, in which "the indigene is a semiotic pawn on a chess board under the control of the white signmaker", but "the game, the signmaking, is all happening on one form of board, within one field of discourse, that of British imperialism" (10). Goldie suggests that, in an extension of the chessboard analogy, "it would not be oversimplistic to maintain that the play between white and indigene is a replica of the black and white squares, with clearly limited oppositional moves" (10).

In "The Economy of Manichean Allegory" (1985), Abdul R. Jan-Mohammed proposes that this opposition between the indigene and the white is governed by a "manichean allegory" of good and evil. He writes that: "The dominant model of power -- and interest -- relations in all colonial societies is the manichean opposition between the putative superiority of the European and the supposed inferiority of the native" (63). Jan-Mohammed attributes any ambivalence evident in relations between whites and indigenes to "deliberate, if at times subconscious imperialist duplicity, operating very efficiently through the economy of its central trope, the manichean allegory" (61). For Jan-Mohammed, the black and white squares on the chessboard are assigned definite moral values (black=evil, white=good), and the white and indigene players are restricted to certain moves in the game.

Terry Goldie pokes holes in Jan-Mohammed's theory when he points out that in some contemporary texts, white and indigene roles are often reversed: "the opposition is

frequently between the 'putative superiority' of the indigene and the 'supposed inferiority' of the white" (10). Works of Canadian literature such as Rudy Wiebe's The Temptations of Big Bear, Robert Kroetsch's "Stone Hammer Poem", Marian Engel's Bear and (arguably) Margaret Laurence's The Diviners all valorize the image of the indigene. In "Romantic Nationalism and the Image of Native People in Contemporary English-Canadian Literature", Margery Fee writes that "those who do not wish to identify with 'mainstream' Anglo-Canadian culture, or who are prevented from doing so, can find a prior and superior Canadian culture with which to identify" (17). Fee explains that Native characters have a "functional importance" in the works of white writers:

Typically, a white speaker or main character is confused and impelled by a strong desire to know more about the past: personal, familial, native, or national. The confusion is resolved through a relationship with an object, image, plant, animal or person associated with Native people. Occasionally, the relationship with a real Native person. The resolution is often a quasi-mystical vision of, or identification with, Natives, although occasionally it simply takes the form of a psychological or creative breakthrough. (16)

While sometimes the image of the indigene is valorized, at other times the image is degraded. In Orientalism, Edward Said explains this apparent ambivalence when he suggests that the positive and negative sides of the image are both contained within its complexity:

Many of the earliest Oriental amateurs began by welcoming the Orient as a salutary *derangement* of their European habits of mind and spirit. The Orient was overvalued for its pantheism, its spirituality, its stability, its longevity, its primitivism, and so forth... Yet almost without exception such over-esteem was followed by a counter-response: the Orient suddenly appeared lamentably under-humanized, antidemocratic, backward, barbaric and so forth. (150)

Like the Orient, "Indians" are either valorized or degraded. These are not "manichean oppositions", as Jan-Mohammed suggests, but positive and negative responses rising out of the same complex image. In essence, the image does not really represent Native peoples but instead reflects the white sign system back onto itself. As Terry Goldie writes: "The Other is of interest only to the extent that it comments on the self" (11).

The question of the relationship between self and Other can extend beyond race. Even though race creates obvious differences between people, Sander Gilman writes that the desire to draw distinctions between self and Other has psychological origins. In Difference and Pathology Gilman writes:

Because there is no real line between self and the other, an imaginary line must be drawn; and so that the illusion of an absolute difference between self and Other is never troubled, this line is as dynamic in its ability to alter itself as is the self. This can be observed in the shifting relationship of antithetical stereotypes that parallel the existence of 'bad' and 'good' representations of the self and Other. But the line between 'bad' and 'good' responds to stresses occurring within the psyche. Thus paradigm shifts in our mental representations of the world can and do occur. We can move from fearing to glorifying the Other. We can move from loving to hating. (18)

Terry Goldie would say that this "move from loving to hating" is a move between "fear and temptation." Again, all these "moves" are taking place on Goldie's white imperialist chessboard, where the signmaking really only recreates new images of the indigene within the white sign system, and the actual Native person is removed from the equation.

The final move on Goldie's chessboard involves a process which he calls "indigenization" (13-14). Indigenization is a process of "becoming" "native". Goldie explains that although Natives are "Other and Not-Self", they must "become self" (12). Goldie cites Gayatri Spivak in her article "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism" when she asserts that "The project of imperialism has always already historically refracted what might have been the absolute Other into a domesticated other that consolidated the imperialist self" (Spivak cited in Goldie 12). The process of "indigenization" reflects the imperialists' paradoxical need to both draw and erase the border between themselves and the Native Other. The process of indigenization often involves acts of appropriation which would eliminate the border between the white colonizer and the Native. Such acts of appropriation can range from selling feather headdresses in souvenir shops and naming cars after famous Indian warriors to more sophisticated forms of literary appropriation which attempt to rewrite and "capture" the subjectivity of the Native.

In Canada's case, Goldie writes that "The White Canadian looks at the Indian. The Indian is Other and therefore alien. But the Indian is indigenous and therefore cannot be alien. So the Canadian must be alien. But how can the Canadian be alien within Canada?" (12). Both Daniel Francis and Margaret Fee describe a similar kind of paradox. Francis concludes The Imaginary Indian with the suggestion that "there is an ambivalence at the heart of our understanding of what Canadian civilization is all about". Francis writes:

On the one hand, the national dream has always been about not being Indian. Since the days of the earliest colonists, non-Natives have struggled to impose their culture on the continent. Indians were always thought of as the Other, threatening to overwhelm this enterprise... on the other hand, as a study of the Imaginary Indian reveals, Euro-Canadian civilization has always had second thoughts... we have suspected that we could never be at home in North America because we were not Indians, not indigenous to the place. (223)

Margaret Fee links this paradox to both Canadian Nationalism and Romanticism. She says that "nationalism is the major ideological drive" behind the use of the image of the Indian in Canadian literature (17). When white characters identify with Natives, it engages both their nationalist sense of attachment to the land, and their romantic sense of the "purity" of the "primitive life" they see Indians living. The Indian also appeals to the white romantic sensibility on the basis of their "indigenous language and mythology, and a past filled with heroic deeds" (18). Such an identification allows for a "white 'literary land claim', analogous to the historical takeover... and it allows for a therapeutic meditation on the evil of technology and the good of a life close to nature, the latter offering a temporary inoculation against the former" (17). But this cannot be a seamless transformation. As Fee notes, there is a "bad fit" between "Old World Romantic theory and the New World situation". "Those closest to the soil are not blood ancestors, their cultural traditions are alien, and to become their mouthpieces in any valid sense is to betray one's own culture and its claim to the land" (17).

Writers have tried to overcome the paradox of "becoming" "native" using what Said calls "standard commodities" (Orientalism 190) within an "economy" of native

tropes. Goldie identifies two of the commodities in Canadian, Australian and New Zealand Literatures as sex and violence. Goldie calls these commodities "emotional signs" and "semiotic embodiments of primal responses" (15). White writers recreate the image of the indigene in terms of fear and temptation, in the guise of the "dusky maiden" and the "demonic violence of the fiendish warrior" (15). Goldie also identifies the natural, orality, mysticism and prehistoricity as additional "standard commodities" used to appropriate the image of the Indian.

The sexual commodity is represented by what Goldie calls the "Indian Maiden", who "tempts the being chained by civilization towards the liberation represented by free and open sexuality, not the realm of untamed evil but of unrestrained joy" (15). The commodity of violence is "shown to be of the indigene essence that is an expression of nature; it is not a human response by the indigenes to oppression" (95). The sex and violence of the indigene are poles of attraction and repulsion, representing both the best and the worst of the natural world. As a "natural commodity" the indigene is used "to present the possibility of nature in a human form" (19). The indigene does not just live on the land, *s/he is* the land. The fourth commodity in Goldie's list, orality, concerns the idea that indigenes operate on a different level of consciousness because they speak, and do not write (16): "Orality represents a different order of consciousness, one which makes the indigene so clearly Other, something far more alien than simply an older, more primitive, a more sexual, a more violent society" (110). The mysticism of indigenes is valorized as an indicator of "oracular power", either malevolent (as in most nineteenth

century texts) or beneficent (witness the proliferation of books about wise Native elders predicting the planet's demise). The final commodity, prehistoricity, "shapes the indigene into an historical artifact, a remnant of a golden age that seems to have little connection to anything akin to contemporary life" (17). Indigenous culture is seen as true, pure, and locked in some impossible time warp which cannot keep up with the present. Indeed, under the terms of indigenous prehistoricity, Natives are threatened by any development which might threaten their way of life or their historical integrity.

How does the image of the Indian woman fit into this "economy" of "standard commodities" which Terry Goldie describes? The celebrated poet Pauline Johnson is one example of a Native woman who had to buy into the economy of standard tropes about Native peoples. In The Imaginary Indian, Daniel Francis describes the first performance Johnson gave in the Gallery of Art at Toronto's Academy of Music in January, 1892. She recited her poem "A Cry from an Indian Wife", the lament of a Native woman whose husband is going off to fight alongside the Métis in the 1885 Northwest Rebellion. Francis notes: "Here was something different; the rebellion told from the Native point of view, told dramatically, without apology, by a 'daughter of the forest' herself" (112). Johnson's performance took the Toronto literary scene by storm. The reviewer in the Globe wrote that "it was like the voice of the nations who once possessed this country, who have wasted away before our civilization, speaking through this cultured, gifted, soft-voiced descendant" (Toronto Globe, 18 January, 1892).



Soon, Johnson was billed as "the Mohawk Princess", and in November 1892, she began to wear the Indian dress that became a hallmark of her performances. Francis describes her costume as

a buckskin dress, fringed at the hem to reveal a lining of red wool and decorated at the neck with silver brooches, buckskin leggings and moccasins. Later, she added a necklace of ermine tails. At her waist she carried a hunting knife and an authentic Huron scalp inherited from her great-grandfather. A red wool cloak hung from one shoulder. One sleeve was a long piece of fringed buckskin, attached at the shoulder and the wrist; the other was a drape of rabbit pelts. (Francis 115)

Francis supposes that "Johnson must have come up with this polyglot costume herself" (115). Johnson's audience loved this "authentic" Indian costume, and they thrilled at the war whoops she used to punctuate her readings, the macabre scalp dangling at her waist, and her poems about torture and war. Johnson even adopted the name Tekahionwake, meaning Double Wampum. This name was actually her great-grandfather's, and she adopted it as a "gesture of identification with her Native background" (Francis 116).

Here, we can see how Pauline Johnson's success depended on her successful employment of the "standard commodities" Terry Goldie identified. Her rabbit pelt-and-buckskin costume identified her as someone who lives in, and wears, the natural world. One of her most popular poems was "The Song My Paddle Sings", and it became the anthem of outdoor enthusiasts and a staple at campfires. The Huron scalp, and the tales of torture and war encouraged the audience to make thrilling assumptions about Native 'violence'. Her name, Tekahionwake, speaks of Native orality and mysticism, referring to a kind of knowledge and language beyond what whites are capable of understanding. Her

costume and the material for her poems identified her as a kind of "historical artifact", recalling a distant past and a people, as the *Globe* reviewer wrote, "who have wasted away before our civilization."

Pauline Johnson's sexuality is an especially interesting kind of "commodity". When Johnson presented her non-Native material, she wore a formal dinner gown. Francis calls Johnson a "White Man's Indian" because she "had the polished manners of a well-bred, middle-class Victorian gentlewoman... she had no desire to be considered anything but Native, but there is no question that she made it easy for them. Everyone she met remarked on her manners, her charm, her good looks" (117). By "making it easy" for the White audience, Johnson somehow managed to walk the line between the "dusky" and sexually inviting Indian maiden, and the appropriately demure and asexual Victorian woman. Given the costume of rabbit pelts, buckskin and red wool cloaks Johnson presented herself in, there could not have been much chance of seeing any exposed, "exotic" red skin. Although Johnson's poems conformed to the melodramatic conventions of the time, she did manage to insert some proto-feminist and anti-racist messages in her works. Francis notes that: "her brave heroines have to overcome not only social and sexual obstacles to win the man of their dreams, but racial obstacles as well. She often portrayed the traumatic effects of contact between Native and European in terms of a tragic love affair between a Native woman and a White man" (120).

Pauline Johnson and her poetry make two cameo appearances in Green Grass.

Running Water. When Alberta tries to think of a way to conceive a child without getting stuck with a husband, she decides that one option “was to get dressed up and go to one of the better bars in town, pick out a decent looking man, and use him as a willing but uninformed father” (GGRW 66). She goes to an upscale lounge called the Shagganappi to execute her plan. Shagganappi was the name of Johnson’s “half-breed” hero, which is ironic, since had Alberta been successful, she most likely would have found a white man to father her child. In Johnson's poem, Shagganappi was the name of a romantic hero. But in GGRW, the romantic, heroic connotations of "Shagganappi" contrast sharply with the painfully un-romantic choice Alberta makes by going to The Shagganappi, where although "she found the thought of crawling into bed with a strange man paralyzing" (66), she goes through with it anyway. For the generations of Native women succeeding Pauline Johnson, this is the kind of romance that survives; this is what "Shagganappi" has come to mean.

Johnson herself turns up at the Dead Dog Cafe with a group of other “Canadian tourists”; namely Susanna Moodie, Archie Belaney (Grey Owl) and John Richardson. When Sue tells Latisha that Pauline is a part Indian writer, Latisha apologizes for not knowing her work. Pauline says, ““It’s all right dear, not many people do”” (158). In her essay "A Double-Bladed Knife: Subversive Laughter in Two Stories by Thomas King", Margaret Atwood writes that the reason she "did not examine poetry and fiction written by Native writers in English" in Survival's discussion of "the uses made by non-Natives of Native characters and motifs, over the centuries and for their own purposes "is that

there were no Natives writing in English to be found (243). But in her Master's thesis, "Minding Your Relations': Nationalism and Native Community in the Writings of Thomas King", Elizabeth Maurer points out that, in fact, Atwood could have discussed a whole spectrum of Native writers which ranged from Johnson and Joseph Brant (1742-1807), to transcriptions of traditional Native orature, to the burst of writing and publishing by such authors as Maria Campbell which began in the early seventies. Maurer remarks that her "point is not to criticize Survival, but to point out the inherited standards of European literariness and authenticity which have devalued Native literature" (100). Atwood herself echoes this point (although it is difficult to tell whether she might be apologizing for it) when she asks "Why did I overlook Pauline Johnson? Perhaps because, being half-white, she somehow didn't rate as the real thing, even among Natives; although she is undergoing reclamation today." ("Double-Bladed Knife" 243) Johnson's legacy was compromised because she was "not Indian enough" or "not sufficiently literary".

Because of Pauline's compromised legacy, Latisha does not recognize her. But when Pauline leaves the restaurant, she leaves Latisha, another Native woman who suffers through a disastrous relationship with a white man, a huge tip and a copy of The Shagganappi. Johnson's generous tip suggests that the time has come for Natives to stop accepting such compromises, and for all Native voices to be heard. Polly's tip also rewards Latisha for the work she does at the Dead Dog Cafe as she sends up stereotypes about Indians and establishes her independence after her marriage to George Morningstar.

In the 1990s, Pauline Johnson may be a compromised and marginalized figure in Canadian Literature, but for the non-Native audience of her time, Pauline Johnson was the personification of Pocahontas, the virtuous Indian princess. Francis writes that Pocahontas was the "original Miss America", who came to represent the "beautiful, exotic New World itself. Her story provided a model for the ideal merger of Native and newcomer" (121). In her essay, "The Pocahontas Perplex: The Image of Indian Women in American Culture", Rayna Green explores the limited range of Native women's representation in Western iconography. She writes:

Americans had a Pocahontas Perplex even before the teenage Princess offered us a real figure to hang the iconography on. The powerfully symbolic Indian woman, as Queen and Princess, has been with us since 1575 when she appeared to stand for the New World. Artists, explorers, writers and political leaders found the Indian as they cast about for some symbol with which to identify this earthly, frightening and beautiful paradise. (701)

The first image of the Indian woman to appear in Western iconography was the "Indian Queen", who "reigned" as the representative of the New World. In portraits and on maps she appeared "draped in leaves, feathers, and animal skins as well as heavy Caribbean jewellery... [s]he was the familiar Mother-Goddess figure -- full-bodied, powerful, nurturing but dangerous -- embodying the opulence and peril of the New World" (Green 702). Her daughter, the "Princess", emerged in Western iconography when the colonies began to move towards greater independence. In her portraits, she is

"young, leaner in the Romanesque rather than the Greek mode, and distinctly Caucasian, though her skin remains lightly tinted in some renderings... [s]he is armed, usually with a spear, but she also carries a peace pipe, a flag, or the starred and striped shield of Colonial America" (Green 702). These icons of the Indian woman carry loaded images of both fear and temptation. These women are powerful, sometimes to the point of militancy, exotic, beautiful, virtuous, and mystical. The Indian woman "becomes" the land and represents everything Europeans feared and loved about the New World.

While icons of the Indian woman such as "The Indian Queen" and "The Princess" stood for "rude native nobility" (Green 703), they also had a shadow image in the form of the savage Squaw. Green notes that "both [the Native woman's] nobility as a Princess and her savagery as a Squaw are defined in terms of her relationships with male figures" (703). Again, when defining Native identity, the semiotic power rests solely in the hands and words of the white signmakers. A "good" Indian, male or female, is only good because they help white men. Pocahontas, Squanto, and the Indian doctor are all figures of "good" Indians who rescue, or heal, white men. But, as Green points out, "the Indian woman is even more burdened by this narrow definition of a 'good Indian', for it is she, not the males, whom white men desire sexually" (703). When the Native woman must step out of the frame of the virtuous Mother Goddess and actually go about her life as a real woman, as a mother, lover, wife, daughter, sister, she becomes caught in the opposite of her first image: the sexually promiscuous, dirty squaw. "By acting as a real female, she must be a partner and lover of Indian men, a mother to Indian children, and

an object of lust for white men" (Green 703). As soon as a white man consummates his lust with a virtuous Indian Princess, she is transformed into the opposite of virtue, strength and beauty.<sup>1</sup> The squaw is ascribed the same vices attributed to Indian men: "drunkenness, stupidity, thievery, venality of every kind" (Green 711). The only way for Native women to remain on the positive side of the image is to keep their exotic distance, or sacrifice themselves, in Pocahontas-fashion, for the love of a man.

There is no exotic distance for Pochahontas in GGRW when she appears as stripper at the bar where Charlie's father Portland had to work after he could no longer find work "playing" an Indian in the movies. The announcer introduces her as "the fiery savage...the sexiest squaw west of the Mississippi" (211). At first she appears to be the "Princess" Pochahontas, as she "walk[s] around the stage as if she were lost, look[s] out into the audience with her hand shielding her eyes." And then, she mutates into the "squaw", when Charlie notes that "for no particular reason, she beg[ins] to rotate her hips." Portland and the Pochahontas dancer play out Goldie's images of "fear and temptation" to the hilt as they engage in a mock Indian attack/striptease. But at the last minute, the white "cowboy" runs onstage to rescue the nearly naked Princess/squaw, and

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<sup>1</sup> The case of Helen Betty Osborne is proof of the poisonous and pervasive image of the squaw in Canadian society. On Nov. 13, 1971, Helen Betty Osborne was grabbed off the street and forced into a car with four white men. She was brutally beaten, sexually assaulted, and murdered. The report of the Aboriginal Inquiry of Manitoba later concluded that Helen Betty Osborne "fell victim to vicious stereotypes born of ignorance and aggression when she was picked up by four drunken men looking for sex. Her attackers seemed to be operating on the assumption that Aboriginal women were promiscuous and open to enticement through alcohol or violence." (Volume Report of the Aboriginal Justice Inquiry of Manitoba, 14 cited in Acoose, 70)

Portland crawls off the stage in defeat. After all, this cannot be a Native love story, but a story about sex and cowboys and Indians, and the “civilized” must always defeat the “savage”, even in the context of a slimy strip club. Only when the white cowboy/signmaker runs onto the stage do we realize that Pochahontas is actually in need of rescuing: “At first Pochahontas looked frightened, but as the two of them began to dance, things got friendlier” (212). It takes the white man to “claim” the native woman back from the clutches of the “savage”. And then the Pochahontas and the cowboy play out a new kind of kinky fantasy as they dance together onstage: the cowboy gives into both fear and temptation as he swivels hips with the Pochahontas/squaw.

The stereotypes of the Indian Princess and the Squaw have eclipsed the reality of Native women's identities both historically and in the present day. In Iskeewewak Kah' Ki Ni Wahkomakanak: Neither Indian Princesses Nor Easy Squaws, Janice Acoose writes that

Since the very beginning of relations between Indigenous peoples and the white-european-christian newcomers, Indigenous women have been grossly misrepresented, primarily by male writers whose ideological foundation privileges and values men over women. As a result, Indigenous women are continually viewed through a hierarchical value system that represents women somewhere between good and bad, or the madonna and the whore. (71)

Again, these two extreme images of the Indian woman are not manichean oppositions, but are contained within the same complex image, which is defined and restricted by the narrow semiotic field of the white signmaker.



Janice Acoose refers to the "ideological shift" which occurred when the "white-eurocanandian-Christian-patriarchal" system took control in North America (45). "Such shifts inevitably erased Indigenous women's meaningful social, economic, political and spiritual participation in the leadership of their communities, as well as the exercise of and control over their bodies and relations with others" (46). While colonialism may have created impossible stereotypes of both Indian men and women in order to maintain semiotic control over Natives, it also legislated blatant social, political, economic and spiritual control over Natives. By the 1800's in Canada, Natives were segregated to small areas of land called reserves. Acoose writes that "once isolated from other Indigenous groups, Indigenous peoples were encouraged to believe that their social, political, and economic disparity was peculiar and of their own creation" (46). From this position, it was easy for colonial authorities to repress any development of Native political autonomy.

Acoose points out that the colonial authorities stripped Native people's community- and consensually-based ways of governance, social organization and economic practices of their legitimacy and authority. When Natives were forced to obey white laws and assimilate into white society, the role of Native women changed dramatically: "of specific importance to this discussion is the removal of women from all significant social, political, economic and spiritual processes. Where women once participated and contributed in meaningful ways as part of clan, tribal, and council consensus governments, under the colonial regime (and in a more subtle way today) they

were generally excluded" (47). When White authorities had to sort out issues which might have otherwise been dealt with by both Native men and women, the only signatures the Whites would recognize, the only voices they would listen to, belonged solely to Native men. Native women were encouraged to adhere to the patriarchal order. For example, when young Native girls were taken away to residential schools, they were primarily taught domestic skills such as cooking, cleaning, and sewing, which would ensure their future roles as good farm wives and Christian ladies (Acoose 48).

How does the Native concept of 'woman' differ from the White Western concept of an "Indian Woman", and how should this change the way we examine Native literature? According to Paula Gunn Allen, Native women must "reconcile traditional tribal definitions of women with industrial and postindustrial non-Indian discourses" (Sacred Hoop 43). In her essay called "Border Studies: the Intersection of Gender and Colour", Gunn Allen proposes a study of the "concept in relation" as a model:

The concept-in-relation or, more 'nativistically', the understanding that the individualized -- as distinct from the individualistic -- sense of self accrues only within the context of community, which includes the nonvisible world of ancestors, spirits and gods, provides a secure grounding for a criticism that can reach beyond the politicized, deterministic confines of progressive approaches, as well as beyond the neurotic diminishment of self-reflexiveness. ("Border Studies" 314)

In "Our World" Skonaganleh:ra affirms Gunn Allen's proposal when she states that she has "a hard time with this thing called feminism". As a Native woman, while she supposes "equality is a nice thing... and we can never go back all the way," she wants to

"make an effort at going back at least to respecting the role that women played in [Native] communities" ("Our World" 7). This particular emphasis on the woman's relational role in the traditional community stands in opposition to the individualistic kind of "I am Woman, hear me Roar" feminism which has developed in the West. In Thresholds of Difference, Julia Emberley explains that what is needed is a "feminism of decolonization" which posits a different notion of gender formation within traditional Native societies (4). Native women need to understand themselves first on Native terms, and then they will be able to confront the role they must play in the dominant capitalist society. The women in GGRW and MR must assert these identities on both fronts; they must define themselves both within the Native community and in opposition to a dominant Western Christian narrative.

I feel a certain amount of trepidation as I apply anthropologist Alice B. Kehoe's essay, "Blackfoot Persons" (in Women and Power in Native North America) to the work of Thomas King. If one might ask how many angels can dance on the head of a pin, then one might also ask how many Coyotes can dance on the head of an anthropologist in a Thomas King story<sup>2</sup>. I have no doubt that literary critics will soon replace anthropologists as the targets of Coyote's antics. Nevertheless, King's novels are centred around Blackfoot reserves and Kehoe's work describes gender relations in Blackfoot society. Regardless of the Coyote-giggles I hear over my shoulder, there may still be

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<sup>2</sup>See Thomas King's short story "One Good Story, That One" for a coyote-opinion of anthropologists and their endeavors.

some value in applying an anthropological study of gender roles in Blackfoot society to King's novel.

Kehoe's essay is one of thirteen in Women and Power in Native North America. Although the essays describe a huge variation in the notion of gender and gender roles in different tribes throughout North America, they all share several general themes. Firstly, each essay notes what editors Laura Klein and Lillian Ackerman call "a balanced reciprocity," (14) where the worlds of Native women and men were, and are distinctly different, but not generally perceived as hierarchical. "Balanced reciprocity" might also be called "complementarity", where gender roles work symbiotically in a community. The metaphor of the sweetgrass braid fits here: just as several strands woven together are stronger, communities are strong when they are woven together by equal strands of women and men. Secondly, all the authors define "power" within Native communities as a process, rather than a status (12). Power, as a concept, is always discussed apart from a formal political structure.

In her essay, "Blackfoot Persons", Alice Kehoe describes a society in which male roles are more flamboyant, visible and assertive than those of women. But what might seem like a pattern of male "dominance" is balanced with an innate respect for the role of women. Blackfoot women play a crucial role in the community's subsistence, and are believed to possess a "greater innate spirituality" (120) because they are born with the power to reproduce both the human and material components of the social world. For

this reason, more men than women participate in vision quests, since men have a greater need to add to their power "by going out alone to a lonely place where they make themselves pitiable by crying out, naked and hungry, begging the Almighty to relieve them by granting power" (120).

Kehoe also describes the phenomenon of the *ninauposkitzpxpe*, or "manly-hearted woman". The translation of the term fails here, since according to our English understanding it would seem that "the best kind of woman is the one with a man's heart". European gender categories miss the point. As Kehoe points out, Algonkian languages do not distinguish male and female through lexical gender (120). Instead, they distinguish animate from inanimate. It follows, then, that everything that exhibits volition through movement -- humans, animals, thunder -- is marked with animate gender. The degree of 'animation', or power, is evidenced by health, strength, longevity, and success in undertakings. So, a *ninauposkitzpxpe* is a respected elder; a powerful, healthy and strong woman. She is First Woman in GGRW: "Big Woman. Strong Woman. First Woman" (39). In MR, Harlen tells Will that Louise is "formidable": "She's proud, Will, you see how she stands up straight. Granny Oldcrow says Louise is like the women who used to fight with the men. Real tough, those women. They could ride all day" (224). Louise is a modern-day *ninauposkitzpxpe*. Here is Bertha's description of herself when she applies to a dating service in MR: "I'm a Blood Indian woman in good health with lots of friends who say I'm good-looking. I'm not a skinny woman, and I graduated from high school. I got a good job and I've raised four kids and I

have no objection to a couple more. I got my own car. I like to go hunting and fishing, and I play bingo every Thursday" (MR 178). Bertha is another *ninauposkitzpxpe*, who hunts and fishes and exhibits the same "formidable" qualities which made Blackfoot communities strong in the past.

Kehoe stresses the importance of autonomy in Blackfoot societies:

What really matters to a Blackfoot is autonomy, personal autonomy. Blackfoot respect each person's competence, even the competence of very small children, and avoid bossing others. People seek power to support the autonomy they so highly value. Competence is the outward justification of the exercise of autonomy. (122)

It is important to define this autonomy with Gunn Allen's term, "the concept-in-relation" in mind. Again, the Blackfoot concept of autonomy is a sense of self which accrues only within the context of a community. As Gunn Allen writes, a "nativistic" understanding of autonomy is an "individualized", not "individualistic", sense of self ("Borders and Colours" 314). The characters in GGRW and MR frequently remind each other to "mind your relations". The concept of "minding your relations" connects with Gunn Allen's nativistic "concept-in-relation". If you "mind your relations", you have the autonomous responsibility of thinking both for yourself and for your community at the same time.

Native women in GGRW and MR reflect the picture of Blackfoot women Kehoe paints in her essay. Among the characters in GGRW and MR we can find examples of balanced reciprocity, the "ninauposkitzpxpe" figure, the search for autonomy and the

sense that women possess a greater innate spiritual power. In her essay "To Know the Difference: Mimicry, Satire, and Thomas King's GGRW", Dee Horne notes that although King creates characterizations of "mimic men", who are the product of settler culture, none of his female characters are mimics. For Horne, "that none of the mimics is a woman suggests that feminism is a force with which to resist mimicry" (268). In fact, King's strong and self-possessed female characters "...not only refuse to assimilate but also subvert settler culture" (269). King's female characters are granted a level of "authenticity" and subversive power which the men must earn. This subversive power stems from the innate spiritual power of Blackfoot women. Not all of King's female characters possess this power as a given, however. Just as the male characters engage in a learning process (as Eli returns to the reserve, and Lionel learns to assert himself), the women must also reassert their spiritual power in the post-colonial world. In MR and GGRW, King sets out to re-enforce this power by placing his Native female characters in opposition to a dominant patriarchal narrative. The women in MR and GGRW show "which is which" by overthrowing the dominant western Christian narrative which people like George Morningstar reinforce, and asserting their identities through a Native, woman-centered perspective.

## *Chapter Two*

### *"The Way Things Are": Resisting Marginalization*

In addition to challenging the image of the 'Imaginary Indian', Native women are also engaged in resisting their marginalization on the basis of their gender. In an interview in paragraph, Thomas King and Jeffrey Canton have a brief discussion about gender differences in King's fiction. When King states that one of the issues he is interested in "playing with" is "that border between men and women," Canton suggests that "in many ways, the women in your fiction are so much more intelligent than the men." King explains: "It's not so much that the women are smarter than the men.... My sense is that within society as a whole, men are simply more privileged, and with that privilege comes a certain laziness. The women in my books don't take things for granted. They work pretty hard to get what they want and have to make specific decisions to make their lives come together" (3).

In both Green Grass Running Water and Medicine River, King demonstrates the ways both Native and non-Native women are marginalized, and the ways they "work pretty hard" to overcome racist and sexist assumptions and make decisions which allow their lives -- and their communities -- to come together. In all cases, this "work" is a matter of self-preservation and survival, which sometimes has the power to undermine and overthrow various assumptions and attitudes behind the patriarchal western institutions which marginalize women. This "work" sometimes takes the form of



traditional female roles of mothering, nurturing, cooking and otherwise maintaining families, and in other instances, women “work” to overthrow traditional assumptions about their race and gender by redefining their identities as single, independent professionals. In most cases, King avoids drawing absolute divisions between men and women. His male characters are not held up as lazy, privileged abusers, and his female characters are not simply marginalized victims. Rather than point fingers and lay blame, King tries to establish the complexity of the “border between men and women.” He moves on to show the ways this border can be permeable, and the ways both men and women need to work to heal communities.

It seems unproductive and unhealthy for Native women to rage against years of patriarchy and racism when there is much more energy required to heal themselves and their communities. In Medicine River, Will describes his mother Rose’s “favorite expression for all those times in life when things didn’t make sense or couldn’t be explained”:

“That’s the way things are,” she’d say. It wasn’t an answer. It was more a way of managing the bad times. A lot of people like to blame those kinds of things on everything from luck to God. My mother would just shrug and get on with what she was doing. She’d use it when James and me asked those questions that kids will ask. “Why doesn’t Dad come home?” “How come Henry got a bike for Christmas?” “How come the television doesn’t work right?” She would just shrug and say, “That’s the way things are.” (MR 252)

Rose’s approach is far from a cop-out. Rather, than blaming “everything from luck to God”, to history, society, patriarchy, or any other powers, Rose’s strategy is to shrug but

*get on* with what she is doing. Were Rose to agree that indeed, someone, or God, or luck must be blamed for their poverty and unhappiness, she would teach her sons to accept the role of the victim.

“The way things are” for both Native and non-Native women in King’s fiction ranges from fending off seemingly innocuous comments about their marital status or their position in society, to surviving painful marriages and violent domestic abuse. It can be especially empowering for both Native and non-Native women to acknowledge the “way things are” from their marginalized position, but still *get on* with their lives. In The Canadian Postmodern, Linda Hutcheon defines the powerful position of “ex-centrics” or marginalized figures in works which explore boundaries: “This is the power to change how we read history and fiction, to change how we draw the lines we like to draw between the real and the imaginary. The ex-centrics, those on the margins of history - be they women, workers, immigrants (or writers?) - have the power to change the perspective of the centre” (103). Consequently, the process of “just shrugging” and “getting on with what you are doing” is actually a tremendously powerful act which can change the patriarchal and racist perspective of the centre. Were Rose or any other woman to stop and expend her energy raging against God, or luck, or the racist and patriarchal powers which hold sway over society, she would only reinscribe the power of the centre and reaffirm her marginal position. Instead, Rose chooses not to acknowledge the powers of “God” or “luck”, but to get on with the process of raising her family, surviving, and teaching her sons how to survive.

If women are the “ex-centrics” on the margins of history and power, then what does it mean to be a Native woman, where the marginality of race compounds the marginality of gender? The question of Native women's identities is especially complex. As Hutcheon points out, Native women are “doubly colonized by history and gender” (107). Unlike white feminists, who can claim identity and solidarity with other women in the struggle against patriarchy, Native women, like other women of colour, must also confront racial marginalization. If Native women must occupy multiple positions on the margins, how then is it possible to assert a singular identity? In her book, Woman, Native, Other, Trinh T. Minh-ha defines this multiplicity of positions as a “triple jeopardy”:

Triple jeopardy means here that whenever a woman of colour takes up the feminist fight, she immediately qualifies for three possible “betrayals”: she can be accused of betraying either men (The “man-hater”), or her community (“people of colour should stay together and fight racism”), or woman herself (“you should fight first on the woman's side”) (104).

Surely the risk of this “triple jeopardy” could threaten to fracture a Native woman's identity. Where can a Native woman align herself if, any way she turns, she threatens to betray her community, her race, or her gender? In Thresholds of Difference, Julia Emberley describes how “feminism” affects Native women: “for all its claims to difference and plurality, ‘feminism’ is recalled as an instrument of unification to the exclusion of indigenous woman and women who are labelled as ‘immigrant’ or ‘visible minority’” (91).

Thomas King does not seem to want to draw the same distinctions between Native women and white women as Emberley and Minh-ha draw. In fact, the whole question of feminism as a kind of “cause” or political imperative is left hanging in both GGRW and MR. None of the female characters in either novel seem to be threatened with the possibility of a “fractured identity”, or suffer from effects caused by having to hold multiple positions on the margins of society. In fact, the women in King’s novels refuse to view things in terms of a contest between the margins and the centre. They refuse to allow themselves to be marginalized. Although the risk of “triple jeopardy” and the “double colonization” of Native women are valid concerns, the women in King’s novels would rather deal with “the way things are” than embroil themselves in philosophical and political debates about the meaning of feminism for Native women. The women in King’s novels expend their energy primarily on *getting on* with whatever they are doing. Energy spent agonizing over the multiplicity of positions between the margin and the centre drains the energy needed to rebuild communities and assert women’s identities. In fact, the energy spent arguing the difference between the power of those on the margins and those in the centre often winds up reinscribing the power of the centre.

When Alberta meets Connie, the female police officer, they spend a rainy afternoon in her squad car. The topic they discuss is not “feminism”, but the difficulties they experience as women. Alberta talks about her desire to have a child alone, and Connie voices her frustrations about her career. Connie may be a police officer, but in

reality she is treated as a glorified secretary: "I'm not an officer, honey.... Oh, I've got the uniform, and I've got the gun and I can handcuff you and drag you off to jail, but all they let me do is sit behind the desk and take messages. I've been a cop for ten years, and the only time I've been in a patrol car is driving back and forth to work" (GGRW 309).

Neither woman makes any comments about how they have been marginalized, or how unfair it is. Neither offers any solutions. They just commiserate about "the way things are". To Connie, Alberta's decision to be a single mother makes sense: "'Man's a nice thing to have around but so's a dishwasher'" (GGRW 307). She sizes Alberta up, and says, "I take it you're progressive... You know, women's libber" (GGRW 307). Alberta laughs at this, and then she begins to cry. Alberta's complicated emotional reaction (first laughter, then tears) could reflect the complexity of the "triple jeopardy" Minh-ha would say Alberta lives with. "'Whoa,'" says Connie, "'We better talk about this'" (GGRW 307). But what Connie and Alberta need to talk about is primarily personal: there isn't much room in the car on the rainy day for the political machinations which might concern Minh-ha or Emberley. Alberta laughs, and then cries when Connie suggests that they might both be "women's libbers" because for her, the real issues at hand have little to do with the cause of "women's lib" and everything to do with the real challenges (sometimes funny, sometimes painful) of getting on with being women despite "the way things are." Despite the fact that Connie is white and Alberta is Native, both women experience sexism of one sort or another, and share the difficulties of balancing their careers, families, and their individual and communal identities.

Although there are only a handful of non-Native women in GGRW and MR, King does not seem to want to draw major distinctions between the ways Native and non-Native women are marginalized. Connie may be a white woman, but Alberta finds some comfort with her as they discuss their frustrations. More importantly, not all the non-Native women in King's novels are white. In GGRW, Babo Jones deals with both sexism and racism because she is black. When she meets Sergeant Cereno at the hospital to discuss the disappearance of the four old Indians, he calls her "Mrs. Jones". She corrects him: "'Ms. Jones. I'm not married.'" Then he calls her "Miss Jones". She corrects him again: "Ms. I've got four kids" (GGRW 23-24). In other words, "Mrs. Jones" would indicate that she is the property of a husband, while "Miss Jones" would indicate that she is a yet-unmarried woman. "Ms. Jones", on the other hand, can mean that she is an independent woman who can also be mother of four children. When Babo travels across the border into Canada with Dr. Hovaugh, the guard tells Hovaugh that Babo will have to be "registered" because "'All personal property has to be registered'" (GGRW 237). Welcome to Canada, indeed. It is up to the reader to imagine whether the guard wants Hovaugh to "register" Babo because she appears to be his "wife" or his "slave" or both. Regardless, the guard asserts that the black woman accompanying the doctor is nothing more than a kind of "personal property".

The first level of sexism the women in GGRW and MR encounter takes the form of seemingly innocuous offhand comments about how they should be addressed (such as the way Sgt. Cereno can't seem to deal with calling Babo *Ms. Jones*) and their status as

single women. Like Babo, Alberta in GGRW and Louise Heavyman in MR have to fight the fact that society balks at the idea of an unmarried woman. For example, when Alberta asks for a room in a Blossom hotel, the clerk tries to register her as "Mr. And Mrs." Alberta replies, "No, a room for one." The desk clerk looks over his glasses at her. Then when she requests the university discount, and produces her I.D., the desk clerk smiles and says "you never can tell by looking". Alberta retorts: "How true it is, I could have been a corporate executive" (GGRW 174).

When Louise visits a male realtor with South Wing and Will, the realtor assumes that Will is her husband and immediately defers to him, even though Will is not the one buying the house:

"That's a pretty little girl, Mr. Heavyman"  
 "He's not Mr. Heavyman," said Louise. "He's just a good friend."  
 "Ah," said Bruce, "Mr. Heavyman couldn't make it? Well, if you like the house, and I think you will, we can set up a convenient time for him to see it, too. Is he working?"  
 "There isn't a Mr. Heavyman."  
 Bruce looked at South Wing, and he looked at me.  
 "Sure," he said. "Lots of people are doing that these days. House has plenty of room for three." (MR 233)

Louise does her best to correct the realtor, but there seems to be no way around the implicit disapproval he expresses. Single women, apparently, should not buy houses without men. Later, we discover that Louise has bought a house from another single woman, with the help of a female realtor (MR 225).

If society disapproves of single women who buy houses without men, then what happens when a single woman decides to have a child on her own? Alberta decides that the most reasonable method of getting pregnant without getting stuck with a husband is artificial insemination. When she calls the hospital, the nurse she speaks with completely misunderstands her. The idea of a single woman applying to be artificially inseminated without a husband is so foreign to the nurse that two entirely different conversations take place. She tells Alberta:

"And when you get the interview, make sure your husband comes with you. We can't begin the interview process unless both the husband and wife are here."

"I'm not married."

"A lot of people make that mistake."

"I'm sure"

"The women come and the men stay home."

"I don't have a husband."

"And then we have to start all over again." (GGRW 179)

In this conversation, "starting all over again" has two very different meanings. The nurse's idea of "starting all over again" means going off to track down the husband. But for Alberta, "starting all over again" means redefining the traditional concept of a "family" by deciding to have a baby without a husband. Alberta's decision to be a parent on her own is a way of reclaiming her power to create her own definition of who and what her family will be. For Alberta, you don't need to be some man's wife (or property) in order to be a mother.

The question of what to call a woman (Miss, Ms. or Mrs.) may seem somewhat trivial on one level. But on a deeper level, this is really a question of semiotic power.



Just as the border guard can tell Dr. Hovough to register Babo as his “property”, white male “signmakers” have had the exclusive power to assign a title to a woman which identifies her according to her relationship with a man. The title “Ms.” rankles right wing “old boys” like Bill Bursum in GGRW, who resist the new semiotic power those on the margins (such as women and Native people) are working to claim:

Mrs., Miss, Ms. ... He just couldn't keep everything straight. At first it had been fun. Ms. For God's sake, it sounded like a buzz saw warming up. He had tried to keep up, but after a while it became annoying. Indians were the same way.... And you couldn't call them Indians. You had to remember their tribe, as if that made any difference, and when some smart college professor did come up with a really good name like Amerindian, the Indians didn't like it... The world kept changing and you had to change with it. Otherwise you could go crazy like that nut in Montreal. One bad apple and the next thing you know, everyone is screaming that the whole barrel is full of worms. (GGRW 187-188)

Bill's outrageous racist and sexist commentary represents the patriarchal, post-colonial narrative which has marginalized both women and Natives. For Bursum, a woman's title indicates “nothing” about her position in society. And the way you name a Native person has “nothing” to do with recognizing or respecting the status of aboriginal peoples in North America. In reality, both women and Native people have been named according to the terms set forth by white western patriarchy: women are the property of men, and Natives are the property of the state. And of course, for Bill, the horrifying murders by that “nut in Montreal” have “nothing” to do with violence against women. Never mind the fact that Marc Lepine shouted “You are all a bunch of feminists” before he began firing his gun. According to white western patriarchy, Lepine was “just a nut” and there was no reason to see his actions as a backlash against feminism. Bursum may think that

he is “changing” along with the world, but his resistance against calling women “Ms.” or accepting new names for Native peoples reflects the centre’s desire to deny power to those relegated to the margins. Alberta, Louise and Babo’s efforts to assert their autonomy and reject names like “Mrs.” or “Miss”, which only identify their relationship with a man, reflect the struggle of the marginalized margins to reclaim their power to name themselves and overthrow the power of white western male signmakers.

If single women like Alberta, Connie, Babo and Louise have to fight this hard to maintain their autonomy, then the married women in GGRW and MR face an even larger battle. While titles like Miss or Mrs. reveal the semiotic power men have over women, marriage reveals the social and physical power men have over women. Alberta almost lost her autonomy when she married Bob, a white man she met at university. Bob was handsome and witty, and Alberta remembers that there was “love, good times, wonderful and consuming passion, and at the edge of her hearing, the slight change of pitch, the gentle tearing barely audible over the hiss of flames” (GGRW 86). The “slight tearing” Alberta heard was most likely the sound of her future ripping apart: “Bob wanted her to finish her degree. It was the way he started when he wanted to explain why she didn’t need to finish it right away. Why didn’t she wait on her degree and help put him through? Sociology was a good investment. She could come back later, when the children were older, after Bob had established himself in a good government position” (86). Alberta refused to comply with Bob’s plans and quickly realized that her own future as an academic would be threatened. When Bob tried to convince her that she

should give up her degree so that he could eventually get a lucrative job, he joked: “You don’t want to spend the rest of your life living in a teepee, do you?” (GGRW 87). Bob’s joke doubly marginalized Alberta. He may have been teasing, but the underlying assumption is that neither women nor Natives are capable of surviving without a strong white man to look after them. And the Blackfoot haven’t lived in teepees since the white men lived in wood shacks. Alberta left him because she realized that “Bob wanted a wife; he did not want a woman” (GGRW 87). The life she builds as a single woman is the best revenge: she earns her PhD., and becomes a professor of Native history. Then, she decides to redefine the traditional meaning of a family by having a child on her own. After regaining a sense of control in her own life, Alberta reflects on the ways marriage affects a woman’s life:

Alberta liked to drive. She liked to drive her own car, and she liked to drive alone. She didn’t like the idea of a trip, but once she was on her way, once the lights of the city were behind her and the road narrowed into the night, a feeling of calm always came over her, and the world outside the car disappeared. She rarely flew, hated planes, in fact. In a plane, she was helpless, reduced to carrying on an inane conversation with a total stranger or to reading a book while she listened for the telltale vibration in the engine’s pitch or the first groan of the wing coming away from the fuselage. And all the time, that faceless, nameless man sat in the nose of the plane, smiling, drinking coffee, telling stories, completely oblivious to impending disasters. Marriage was like that. (GGRW 85)

Alberta’s view of marriage is also based on what she observed in her own parents’ relationship. Like Rose, Alberta’s mother Ada was also less inclined to lay blame on others for the state of things, but to acknowledge “the way things are” and get on with her life. When Alberta’s family’s Sun Dance costumes were confiscated at the border and returned with footprints all over them, Alberta’s father was so furious he even refused to

open the bags. But Ada was the one who confronted what happened by opening the bags. She discovered that two of the outfits were badly tattered, most of the feathers snapped off, the ends missing. But “Alberta’s mother said the others could be repaired” (GGRW 283). Ada saw things as they were, but decided she knew how to repair them. No need for histrionics, no need to talk about “history”. Just repair, replace, heal, and get on with it. Ada's decision not to discuss "history" did not signal her desire to ignore history of Native oppression. Her action was an affirmation of Native survival, and a refusal to dwell on the past.

Alberta’s father Amos was a “great believer in dreams” (GGRW 255). The best place for dreaming was in the mountains, where he told Alberta you could see many deer, elk, coyotes and “The world. You can see the whole world” (255). But Amos also told her that “women didn’t go into the mountains” and he only took her brothers for trips into the trees. When Alberta asked her mother about the mountains and the dreaming, Ada “shook her head and went back to what she was doing.” Ever the pragmatist, Ada told Alberta that there’s no reason women can’t go into the mountains: ““Your father has his ideas on the subject.”” But if Alberta should decide to go, Ada told her: “Pack a lunch. It’s a long walk” (GGRW 255). Ada’s advice to Alberta indicated that she’d rather teach her daughter to take risks and press forward with her life than allow her to feel diminished by Amos’ sexist assumptions. Ada basically told her daughter that this may be the “way things are” now, but that Alberta didn’t have to accept what her father said. In fact, she should get on with her life. And pack a lunch -- it’s a long journey.

Alberta remembers an episode when her father Amos got drunk and drove his truck into their outhouse: “The light from the house shone on her mother’s back and Alberta could see her mother’s shoulder’s hunch and her fists clench. Then the cursing began and the smashing and the laughter, high-pitched and wild. ‘He’s just got bad times,’ her mother said” (GGRW 89). For Ada, Amos’ drunkenness was “the way things are”. She barely reacted to her husband as he bellowed at her that he was “‘stuck in the shit again’” (GGRW 88). As he staggered up the stairs into the house, Ada stepped back into the doorway and set her feet. Then she threw the bolt across the door and sent her children to bed. The family never saw Amos again. Alberta remembers how “her mother never said a word about the truck or the lake, never seemed to wonder where he had gone to or where the water had come from” (GGRW 90). Ada refused to allow herself or her children to be victimized by Amos’s behaviour. She acknowledged “the way things are”, but then invested her energy in repairing and rebuilding her family. Perhaps it was partly due to Ada’s strength that Alberta was able to escape her marriage to Bob as early as she did, and go on to forge a successful career and an independent life.

As Alberta contemplates her current relationships with Lionel and Charlie, she wonders if “all men were like that, Charlies and Lionels.” Charlie is pushy, aggressive and slick, and he wants to marry her. Lionel is sincere and dull, and needs someone to “help him with his life” – preferably Alberta. She wonders if “maybe, in the end, they all turned into Amoses, standing in the dark, angry, their pants down around their ankles” (GGRW 179). Why, if all men are weak, misguided and angry, do women marry them?

And why would Alberta have risked marriage to Bob after watching the way Amos treated Ada? She knew that getting married young was a mistake, but “there were those driving expectations that hemmed her in and herded her toward the same cliffs over which her mother, her brothers, sisters, cousins, and friends had disappeared” (GGRW 87). Alberta equates marriage with the buffalo jump. She and her relatives and friends are the buffalo, who are herded together and forced over the cliffs of marriage by the “driving expectations” of their community. Like the buffalo, individuals are sacrificed for the good of the community, which needs to ensure its survival and continuance. The best way of making sure the community stays together and reproduces itself is to make certain that lots of people get married. And the best way to feed a Blackfoot community on the prairies was to sacrifice large numbers of buffalo by herding them over cliffs. But if women comprise the greatest number of the “sacrificial buffalo” in this metaphor, does that mean that marriage can threaten female autonomy to the point of extinction? Can women “go the way of the buffalo” too? I suspect that King is trying to prove that women are in fact constantly reclaiming their autonomy despite the negative effects marriage can have on their lives, and that they are fully capable of *surviving* and making their communities strong.

Another of the “driving expectations” of marriage is the expectation of romance. This expectation is fuelled by the countless books and films and songs and stories which try to convince us that everyone should “live happily ever after”. Such romantic expectations can come dangerously close to creating the kind of binaries Terry Goldie

describes in his terms “fear and temptation”. Under the guise of “romance”, women are portrayed as either alluring princesses or debased “squaws”. The alluring princess is identified with the land, and she is destined to marry the “handsome white prince” and live happily ever after. Such stereotypes abound in films like Rose Marie, starring the white Jeanette Macdonald as the Native Princess and Nelson Eddy as the Mountie. But King exposes the effects such expectations can have on women when he gives Jeanette and Nelson a cameo role at the Dead Dog Cafe. The two stars who once crooned the “Indian Love Song” to each other are now in their twilight years. When we meet them, Nelson is senile and stupid, and Jeanette is more than a tad bitter: “But you have been married” Jeanette says to Latisha at the Dead Dog Cafe. “Every woman makes that mistake at least once” (GGRW 131). As she helps her to leave, Latisha feels the old woman’s grip tighten on her arm and realizes that “the woman was strong and could probably break Nelson’s neck”. “He’ll die before I do,’ Jeanette said under her breath as Latisha helped her down the hall. “There’s some consolation in that” (GGRW 134). We see Jeanette and Nelson in their old age so that we might see the way things are, rather than continue to believe in the romance of the way things *should* be.

It is fitting that Latisha should be the one to meet Jeanette Macdonald, since Latisha once fell for a white “Nelson Eddy” type in the form of her ex-husband, George Morningstar: “Latisha had even liked his name. It sounded slightly Indian, though George was American” (GGRW 133). George even looks like a hero in a romantic movie in his “tan cotton slacks and a billowy white cotton shirt that was loose in the body

and tight at the cuffs” (GGRW 132) (similar to what Kevin Costner, another romantic hero who found love in a Native community, wore in Dances With Wolves). They meet when he comes to the reserve for Indian days. Latisha observes him, “watching, listening, looking for all the world like the most intelligent man in the universe” (GGRW 132). George is pleased that Latisha is a “real Indian,” and flatters her with his attentiveness. To her, he seems “vulnerable, almost girlish, always looking off into space” (GGRW 134). It is after they are married that Latisha realizes that “the reason why George wonders so much about the world is because he doesn’t have a clue about life” (GGRW 134). George suggests that they honeymoon at the Sun Dance. Sitting in the teepee, he says: ““This is great, Country. Just like the movies. Any way you can lock the door?”” (GGRW 336). George’s romantic expectations that things would be “just like the movies” are soon dashed by the steady stream of relatives who pour into their tent for coffee and stew. Bored, George the romantic individualist wanders off to invent new ways of erecting teepee poles, determined that his way will work better than the method Natives have been using for centuries.

George romanticizes and essentializes Latisha. In the same way Europeans (who had no clue about the world either, since Christopher Columbus was trying to find the far East when he accidentally sailed into an island in the Carribean) colonized North America, George colonizes Latisha and calls her his "Country". Latisha is a "doubly colonized" figure because she is oppressed both as a Native married to an abusive White, and a woman married to an abusive man. George and Latisha's marriage is a microcosm



of post-colonialism, where the dominators exercise abusive power over the dominated. Terry Goldie might identify George's name for Latisha, "Country", as a form of indigenisation. George calls Latisha his "Country" as a way of "becoming" "native". Each time George calls Latisha his "Country", he equates her with the land he (the white man) has colonized. It allows him to say that he "lives in her" as if *he* is the Native. George appropriates Latisha's Native identity in order to fuel his romantic ideas of "becoming Native" himself.

George's "romantic ideas" take a violent turn just before their third child is born. A benign event sets him off. He walks into Latisha's restaurant wearing a fringed leather jacket. He tells Latisha that "It's history... Most old things are worthless. This is history." George's fringed jacket and his names (both George and Morningstar) link him to General George Custer. Despite the fact that Custer was soundly and famously defeated by thousands of Lakota, Cheyenne and Arapaho warriors at Little Big Horn, he became a hero in American folklore and the subject of numerous books, songs and paintings. All depicted Custer as the gallant victim of bloodthirsty "savages," while in fact, it was Custer's own arrogance and poor strategy that started the battle in the first place. The fact that most of the Natives who fought and defeated Custer were forced to surrender within a year of their greatest battlefield triumph has been lost in the flood of posters, poems, and "souvenirs" depicting "Custer's Last Stand." George's claim to the "history" in his jacket demonstrates his incredibly muddled and ill-educated sense of "history." In fact, George has no idea what story his jacket represents. Who, if they

figured out what Custer really did, would want to wear a jacket like that?

Latisha is indifferent to his posturing. She tells him: "Guess you got to know which is which" (GGRW 192). Latisha's response to George's "history" echoes the Native response to white European History: indifference. In the same way that white Canadians want to "belong" in Canada and claim an indigenous relationship with the land, George tries to claim that his jacket is "history". The jacket represents George's attempt to "indigenise" himself. Latisha essentially tells him that he has to know the difference between his white "history" and indigenous "history". And just as white Europeans who felt alien in their new country punished Native peoples for having a prior claim to the land, George punishes Latisha for her indifference to his "history". Although she is indifferent to George's version of "history", her comment shows that she is not at all indifferent to the distinction between white "history" and indigenous history. Unlike George, Latisha is able to look objectively at both versions of history and still know "which is which". George, on the other hand, reacts violently when she suggests that there might be more than one version of history to contend with.

Latisha stays with George for nine years: "It was one thing to know that George was worthless and quite another to act on it" (GGRW 190). He refuses to keep a job, has numerous affairs, and persists in pursuing ridiculous schemes and ideas. George never seems to accept "the way things are". He tells Latisha "Things that stand still, die" (GGRW 190). Towards the end of their marriage he decides to quit his job and stay

home with their kids: "It's no problem, Country, we'll have a great time" (GGRW 245). George decides that "the way things were" while Latisha was cooking and looking after the family weren't good enough, and within a week he buys a pasta machine, and tries to bake fresh bread and produce gourmet meals. The next week, he gives up and leaves. He writes a letter "filled with emotion and excitement" telling Latisha he has to "get his life together" but promises to be back (GGRW 249). More letters follow, full of more romantic ideas about "love and the moon and the stars and the seasons" (GGRW 249), but never admitting the way things really were, or apologizing for his behaviour. The letters continue to reflect his desire to essentialize Latisha and "indigenise" himself: "How I yearn for the simplicity of the west and the perfect clarity of sunrise and sunset. I remember you always as my sunrise and know that you will forever be a part of my heaven" (GGRW 250). He seems to want to claim his "origins" in Latisha and the west, as if she is the land and *he* is "Native" to her.

Latisha refuses to allow herself to be victimized by George. She stops reading his letters, and lets them collect dust in her closet. It is important to note, however, that she does not throw George's letters away. Just as Rose saves her husband's letters and photographs for her sons to see, Latisha also intends to allow her children to read their father's version of things someday. Rose and Latisha make sure that their children will have access to several different "versions" of both their parents' lives. Regardless of the ways their husbands treated them, both women decide to permit their husband's letters to speak for themselves when their children begin to ask about who they were. And they

trust that their children will have the intelligence and insight to be able to see "which is which" about their fathers on their own. Rose and Latisha do not worry that the "truth" of their abuse and their pain will be eclipsed by the "lies" their husbands tell in their letters. After all, "there are no truths, only stories". Therefore, every story, good and bad, about a person must be allowed to remain. It will be up to Rose and Latisha's children to learn to "mind their relations" well enough to gain a clear picture of their fathers. By saving these letters, Rose and Latisha suggest that the only way to see something, or someone, clearly is to look from many different perspectives. This, of course, is what Bill Reid instructs us to do when we walk around 'The Spirit of Haida Gwaii' and examine the multiplicity of perspectives and relationships within and amongst his creations.

Like Rose, Latisha extracts herself from George's clutches and gets on with *her* own story: running the Dead Dog Cafe and raising her three children.<sup>1</sup> Like the other women in King's novels, Latisha acknowledges the "way things are", but gets on with the rest of her life. The only time she mentions the fact that George abused her is when she talks with Alberta: "Well, I figure it was because he was bored. George wanted each day to be a new adventure. Men get bored easy, you know. Most of them don't have much of an imagination"(GGRW 369). George beats her because he can never fulfill all his romantic expectations, and refuses to accept things as they are. And no, he doesn't have much of an imagination, so he gets bored, angry and violent. But Latisha does accept the

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<sup>1</sup> The revenge Latisha takes on George in the form of the Dead Dog Cafe, where she subverts romantic expectations about "Indians" will be discussed in the next chapter.

way things are, survives her experience with George and gets on with her life because she possesses all the imagination George lacked. She invests this imagination in the Dead Dog Cafe, where she cleverly subverts all the romantic expectations about “Indians” George is so determined to believe in.

When George arrives back at the Sun Dance, Latisha reacts in exactly the same way Ada did when Amos staggered up the lawn towards her house. Alberta “could feel Latisha’s body tense up, could feel her hands clench as she set her feet hard into the ground and waited” (GGRW 378). Like Ada, Latisha refuses to allow George to victimize her again. George returns to the Sun Dance as a photojournalist for a New Age magazine. Apparently, George has been hired by others who want to appropriate Native identity as much as he does. Even though he knows cameras are not allowed, he tries to reclaim his “indigenous” identity when he says “Sure, but that’s for strangers. Not family” (GGRW 380). Latisha soon discovers that George is secretly taking pictures anyway. There is a wonderful moment when the whole community surrounds George and takes his camera. Just as he tries to appropriate a Native identity by wearing buckskin jackets, marrying and beating a Native woman and calling her his “Country,” and then coming back to take photos at the Sun Dance, the community reclaims every image George stole when they expose his film. But Eli gives George ten dollars to cover the cost of the lost film, so that they do not have to resort to “stealing back” what was stolen from them. George is reduced to screaming, ““Nobody cares about your little powwow. A bunch of old people and drunks sitting around in tents in the middle of nowhere.... You

all act like this is important, like it's going to change your lives. Christ, you guys are born stupid and you die stupid" (GGRW 386). The irony is that, in fact, George cares too much about all of this. He spends most of his time with this community trying to appropriate everything he sees. Everything George says really only refers back to him: the only person who was "born stupid" and will likely "die stupid" is George, who can never accept the "way things are" and lives according to his romantic expectations.

The fourth chapter of Medicine River deals with two more cases of domestic abuse. By weaving Mrs. Oswald's story together with that of January Pretty Weasel, King points out that both Native and non-Native women suffer domestic abuse, and their stories should not be told in isolation simply because of social, economic or racial differences. Domestic abuse has nothing to do with race, or social or economic status. It can happen to anyone, anywhere. But Natives and whites may have different ways of dealing with it.

January Pretty Weasel deals with the "way things are" and gets on with healing herself by writing a letter which constructs a fiction about her abusive husband and gives her family and community another version of her husband's life to help them heal. Without January's letter, only one story about Jake would remain: the story of an abusive drunk who put a bullet through his head. The real Jake was the kind of man who beat his wife in front of the whole community just because he had fouled out of a basketball game. As the other members of the team stood there staring, not helping her, "January

tried to smile, and she waved her hand as if everything was okay” (MR 45). Even though January regularly had to go to the emergency ward, she refused to file charges against Jake. Perhaps filing charges would have forced her to be a victim, and to acknowledge that Jake’s anger held so much power over her. Given the way the justice system treats Native women, it is not surprising that January chose not to succumb to the potential for a second "systemic" victimization by trying to file charges. Even though she appeared to acquiesce and accept Jake's behaviour, she maintained a form of control over her own circumstances, rather than suffer the loss of control that most likely would occur if she sought the help of social services or the justice system. The intervention of (mostly white) judges, lawyers and social workers would inevitably reduce her situation to the stereotypical story of the abused Native wife/victim. January prefers to be able to tell her own story for herself and for her community.

When Jake shoots himself, the other men question whether January shot him. Men like Elwood and Leroy refuse to even wonder why Jake would beat January, let alone commit suicide. Leroy says:

People like that don't shoot themselves. Shit. Only mistake he made was turning his back on January. That women's liberation's what's doing it. Fellow puts a woman in her place don't give her any call to shoot him. Hell, we'd all be dead.... Sure, Jake pushed a little bit. That's what men do. But January should have said something. Jake would've stopped. No good letting things build up like that. (MR 50)

It appears that Jake not only failed January, but some of the other men in Medicine River fail her now, too. Leroy’s comments point to January’s terrible double-bind: on the one

hand, Jake should be allowed to “put her in her place,” but if he does, the onus is on her to “say something about it” and prevent things from “building up”. In other words, January should have been responsible for preventing, then enduring, and then managing Jake’s violence. The “liberated woman,” according to Leroy, should be blamed for failing to take responsibility for her husband’s failure to cope.

But January did not shoot Jake. She tells Will that she had ““found him like that... lying on the bed with that shotgun. I don’t know what happened. Maybe he was just fooling around. There wasn’t a note. So maybe it wasn’t a suicide. Maybe it was a mistake.”” She mentions that he beat her and simply says, ““He should have apologized before he died.”” And then she admits that she wrote the note for him: “You think the RCMP will give it back? I want it for the kids... when they’re older” (MR 49). The letter January writes constructs a version of Jake which help everybody to grieve. Harlen tells Will: “It was a long letter... seven or eight pages. Written on some fancy stationery. Thelma said it was neat with nice handwriting, all the lines straight” (MR 46). If January’s letter is meant to be a calculated lie about Jake, she probably would have taken more care to make it look and sound like a man had written it. Instead, she does not really try disguise the fact that she had written it, for those who would care to notice.

January writes the letter for the same reasons that both Rose and Latisha save their abusive husbands' letters. Someday, her children will need to ask who their father was and why and how he died. Rose, Latisha and January ensure that their children will have



access to several different versions of their fathers' stories, so that they will be able to decide for themselves "which is which". January's letter will become a tool for her children to help them to come to terms with Jake's death. A suicide, especially, has the power to silence all the other stories you can tell about a person. It seems that there is only one story left to tell: He killed himself. But January's letter offers other stories and poses other questions about Jake to help her children and her community to negotiate the monolithic silence of his suicide. From what Will tells us, it seems that January's method really did help:

It was funny, in a way. Jake's suicide, I mean. For a month or so after the funeral, everybody mostly worried about him, as if he were alive. We all had Jake stories, and even January was anxious to tell about the times Jake had taken the kids shopping or made a special dinner or brought her home an unexpected and thoughtful present. I wasn't sure how, but she seemed to have forgotten the beatings and the pain, and in the end, all of us began talking about the letter as if Jake had written it.

"Jake really had a way with words."

"You can see he cared for his family."

"Hard for a man to say those things."

You could see that January wanted it that way, and when you thought about it long enough, I guess it wasn't such a bad thing. After a while, we all forgot about the Jake January found lying on the bed, his head hard against the wall, the shotgun pressed under his chin, one hand on the trigger, the other holding a pen, trying to think of something to say.

(MR 51)

Indeed, January's letter offers the hopeful suggestion that even if Jake had nothing to say, or no story to tell, she and her family and community can survive by creating and re-creating versions of Jake which might help them to heal. Her letter also prevents her from being marginalized by the rest of the community (especially the men who refuse to accept that their "buddy" was a drunk and a wife beater). Had she not written the letter,

all of the wounds Jake inflicted would have stayed open. Her community might only remember her as “Jake’s abused wife”, or even worse, as the woman who possibly murdered him. But instead, she initiates a kind of healing rite in the form of communal storytelling about Jake which helps everyone to see past the monolithic stories of her abuse and his suicide. Like Rose and Latisha, January makes the point that the only way to know “which is which” about a person and truly see “the way things are” is to look at them from many different perspectives. Jake’s suicide silenced many of the other stories which could be told about him, but January’s letter helps her family and her community to see Jake, as James Tully might say, “aspecttively”. January does not try to replace “lies” with “truth”, but makes sure that the stories survive so that her children can survive too.

Mrs. Oswald, however, suffers the consequences of trying to replace truth with lies. Mrs. Oswald and her daughter Lena live in the same low-income apartments with Will’s family in Calgary. Although Mrs. Oswald tells everyone that her husband had just died and they would only live there until the estate was settled, Lena tells Will that her father hadn’t really died, but that her mother was hiding from him because he beat her. Will remembers that from behind, Mrs. Oswald “looked like a young girl, all slim and fragile. But when she turned, you could see her face.” Rose tells Will that “people born rich [like Mrs. Oswald] could never learn to be poor... it was too hard on them. They just shrivelled up from bad luck and bad times” (MR 45). Mrs. Oswald tries to swallow her pain by lying about her situation and wearing a mask of happiness: “To watch her in her long dresses, moving around the neighbourhood, perched on her toes, gesturing and

calling out in her singsong voice as if she was in a movie, you'd think that she was filled up with herself. She was always laughing about something, her hands and arms constantly in motion, like a bird trying to fly" (MR 46). Only when Will and James meet Mrs. Oswald on the roof of their building do we realize the extent of the pain Mrs. Oswald is trying to repress: "Mrs. Oswald came up and walked to the edge and lifted her arms up over her head as though she thought they were wings." When the two boys startle her, she snaps back into the persona she had created and "smiled and waved... and yoo-hooed the way she did, standing on her toes and leaning forward. Wasn't it a beautiful view, she said. Wasn't it a fine, manly wind, too, and how it blew and made your eyes water" (MR 46).

While January copes with her abuse by fictionalizing Jake, Mrs. Oswald fictionalizes herself. January's method of coping is self-affirming, but Mrs. Oswald's method is self-effacing. Through her actions, January resists further victimization and helps her to maintain her connections with her community by sharing "good memories" about Jake. But Mrs. Oswald's feelings of powerlessness and isolation almost drive her to suicide.

When Will tells his mother Rose about Mrs. Oswald's abuse, she tells him he "should leave things such things be, that it was best to let white people work out their own problems" (MR 47). Rose's comment reflects the more commonly heard, "let the Natives work out their problems for themselves", and the false belief that domestic abuse

is restricted to certain racial or economic groups. But when Mr. Oswald finds Mrs. Oswald and beats her severely again, Rose decides to help: "My mother looked at Mrs. Oswald for a long time, and then she called the ambulance" (MR 48). Clearly, this is a woman who needs someone to help her. It is not a case of "getting mixed up in a white person's affairs" anymore, but a case of offering compassion and practical assistance.

Rose has good reasons to be wary of getting involved with white affairs. When she married Will's father, a white man identified only as "Bob," against the wishes of her family, she lost her Native status. Granny Pete was especially angry at George Harley for introducing the couple and standing at their wedding: "'Damn bottle Indian.'" "'Just got to show off his relations to the whites. No more sense than a horseshoe'" (MR 8). Granny Pete's assessment of Bob was that he "had a talent for lying and drinking" (MR 12). Not only did Bob turn out to be an alcoholic, but he also left Rose and their two sons when he ran off to work for the rodeo. Even after Bob died, Rose was unable to return to live on the reserve. On the day their uncles arrived to help them move, Will's brother James asked if they were going back to the reserve:

"No," said Maxwell, "you can't. You guys have to live in town cause you're not Indian any more."

"Sure we are, " I said, "same as you."

"Your mother married a white."

"Our father's dead."

"Doesn't matter."

I could feel my face get hot. "We can go to the reserve whenever we want. We can get in a car and go right out to Standoff."

"Sure," said Maxwell. "You can do that. But you can't stay. It's the law."

(MR 9)

Will recognizes that "It wasn't so much the law as it was pride, I think, that let my mother go as far as the town and no farther" (MR 9). Rose's marriage to Will's father alienated her from her community and robbed her of her Native status. When he took off and left her with two small boys to support, she had to take cleaning jobs at the Bay and night shifts at Petro Canada to make ends meet. Will remembers that in the low-income apartment building in Calgary where they lived, "there were other Indian families in the building, mostly mothers and children." (MR 44). No doubt these were other single mothers who had lost their Native status after marrying white men. Despite all the ways Rose was marginalized, she asserted her strength by refusing to acknowledge the powers (white, patriarchal) which had marginalized her: "that's just the way things are."

At the beginning of the novel, it would appear that Will's main impetus for sorting through his past is to come to terms with his absent father: "I must have seen my father, heard his voice. But there was nothing. No vague recollections, no stories, no impressions, nothing" (MR 8). When Will finds a series of letters his father wrote to his mother, we are led to hope that some questions might be answered. Who was Will's father? What kind of man was he? Why did he abandon his family? The letters do little to answer these questions. We learn that his father left his family to go and work for the rodeo. The letters he writes reveal his carelessness and irresponsibility: "I've thought about calling or writing, but you know how it is" (MR 1) "I'd send some money, but I'm short right now. Got to save up for a new saddle. Man's got to work, you know" (MR 4). Will's father's letters seem to feign a friendly interest in the family, but each letter

contains some explanation for the money he won't be sending, or a gift that doesn't arrive, or a promise we know he never kept. The picture of Will's absent father fades when the picture of his strong and complex mother Rose begins to emerge. Instead of asking who his father was and why he left, it becomes much more important to ask about who his mother was, and how she maintained her strength, raised Will and James, and survived.

Just as January wanted to save Jake's suicide note for her children to see when they are older, Rose saves the letters from Will's father for Will and James (MR 10). And like January, Rose weaves together a combination of fiction and fact about Bob so that James and Will will have some memories of him, but not feel victimized by his carelessness and irresponsibility. Rose and January both work to erase the pain their husbands cause them so that "the way things are" for them need not be "the way things should be" for the generation of sons they are raising. Rose also fictionalizes sections of her past so that Will and James will have some sense of the father they never knew without passing on the pain and resentment she must have felt after Bob abandoned them and she lost her Native status. Will remembers how Rose "never talked much about [his] father, and James and me knew it wasn't a good idea to ask. But every so often, she would get in a story-telling mood." Rose recalls: "'Will, you liked to drive. Any time someone would come by with a car, you'd beg to sit behind the wheel. You could hardly see over the dash, but that didn't bother you none. Off we'd go down the road with you sitting on someone's lap, holding onto that wheel like you were in the races'" (MR 124). Will knows that "someone" was his father, but Rose never mentions his name. Rose

wants to “tell the good stories” about the men in Will’s life, so that like January, she could try to make sure that the “way things are” for her need not repeat themselves in the next generation.

When Will reads the letters his mother left for him, his initial impulse may have been to search for an understanding of his dead father, but what he really discovers is a clearer picture of his strong and complex mother. The picture he pieces together is especially clear because he has the opportunity to see his mother from a multiplicity of different perspectives, and hear about her through many stories, both her own and her community’s. When January’s children read Jake’s suicide note, they too will learn much more about who their mother was than they will ever know about their father. Both January and Rose weave their own fictions into the facts about their husbands in order to set a new example for their children to follow. As Will returns to Medicine River to rediscover his past and negotiate his identity as a Native man, he most often relies on the guidance of women, both living (Louise, Bertha, Martha Oldcrow, Floyd’s Granny) and dead (Granny Pete, Rose). He also relies on Harlen, a trickster figure who possesses many “womanly” qualities<sup>2</sup>. In this way, we can begin to see how the “border between men and women” which King identifies can be permeable.

The women in GGRW and MR resist marginalization in the form of racism, sexism, and domestic abuse by acknowledging “the way things are” but forging ahead

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<sup>2</sup>Harlen’s “womanly qualities” will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Three.

with their lives and making certain that their children will be able to see their lives from many different perspectives. By refusing to be victimized when they are disempowered, these women also refuse to reinscribe the power of the white western patriarchy which intrudes on their lives. Thomas King is not interested in providing a "moral diagnosis" for the ills of the communities he writes about. He does not write about the pain his female characters experience in order to prove that white western patriarchal institutions dominate women, but to prove that women can, and do, successfully resist and overthrow such powers by insisting that "truth" does not need to replace "lies" in order for everyone to understand the "way things are".



## *Chapter Three*

### ***"She knows, however, that many strands braided together cannot be torn apart": Braiding Together Texts, Braiding Together Differences***

In addition to resisting marginalization, the women in King's novels also develop creative strategies to re-imagine and transform the cultures they live in. These strategies are grounded in a particularly Native world view, in which the differences between cultures and genders are understood to be aspectival, not essential. The Native understanding of difference can be explained by the practice of braiding, which has sacred significance in Native culture. In "Our World", Ossennontion states that "one of the very small girls understands at three years, the teaching of the sweetgrass braid -- how weak one strand is, how easy it is to break it up, and it's gone. She knows, however, that many strands braided together cannot be torn apart" (8). In his short story "Traplines," Thomas King makes a similar point about the strength which comes from binding objects, or people, together:

Once when my sister and I were fighting, my father broke us up and sent us out in the woods to get four sticks apiece about as round as a finger. So we did. And when we brought them back, he took each one and broke it over his knee. Then he sent us out to get some more.... When we came home with the sticks, my father wrapped them all together with some cord. Try to break these, he said. We jumped on he sticks and we kicked them. We put the bundle between two rocks and hit it with a board. But the sticks didn't break. Finally, my father took the sticks and tried to break them across his knee. You kids get the idea, he said. (One Good Story, That One 43)

Just as sweetgrass and sticks become stronger when they are braided or bound together,

so can stories -- and people. In his novels, Thomas King demonstrates that the resilience produced when sweetgrass is braided together might also result when stories, and people, are braided together. It is not only possible to braid together homogenous objects like sweetgrass and sticks; it is also possible to braid together heterogeneous subjects such as Native and non-Native stories, or even women and men. The women in King's novels find strength when they braid their own lives, on Native terms, together with dominant western Christian narratives. This textual "braiding" results in a powerful form of social and literary resistance. Braiding not only strengthens both individuals and communities; the practice of braiding together people and stories is a powerful strategy of resistance against white western culture for both Native women and men.

Intertextuality is a process of braiding texts together. The concept of intertextuality was originally articulated by the French theorist Julia Kristeva. Laura Donaldson paraphrases Kristeva when she explains that intertextuality "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 into the earlier" (28). As it is described here, intertextuality sounds potentially quite violent. In many cases, it can be. Donaldson refers to the following example of colonial "intertextuality" to demonstrate the results of transposing one sign system into another:

On a foreboding day in the 1620's, a group of Spanish Franciscans manifested their love for Christianity's God by forcibly entering the kivas of Santo Domingo Pueblo and building crosses on them to delimit a new

sacred topography.... The Franciscan attempt to expel sacred beings by literally and metaphorically overwriting their social text vividly dramatizes the process of intertextuality, or the absorption and transposition of one sign system by another -- here, the Pueblo's interpretation of their world by the hegemonic narratives of imperial Christianity. (Donaldson 27)

But Donaldson proposes that King uses intertextuality to entirely different ends:

"...unlike the Friars at Santo Domingo Pueblo, 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" (34). This parodic resistance attempts to "braid together" heterogeneous elements on Native terms, not on the white terms of dominance and destruction. The Friars of Santo Domingo are only one example of the systematic imposition of western Christian culture over Native peoples since the arrival of Columbus.

King does not does not intend to fight fire with fire by attempting to reclaim Native symbols and stories by repeating the process which whites initiated. Instead, King applies the sacred Native process of braiding to reassert the strength which was lost after colonization. In a braid, the strands are woven together to make a unit, but each strand maintains its integrity and remains distinct from the others. One strand does not transpose or absorb the other strands. Ossenonntion and Skonaganleh:ra explain their goals as Native women in the following statement: "We are reclaiming our pride and traditions. We are asking for opportunities to practice our culture. To transmit the braiding of our past, present and future into terms others can understand and respect"

(Ossennontion [Marilyn Kane] and Skonaganleh:ra [Sylvia Maracle], "Our World", 5). In no way do these goals intend to transpose or overthrow white western narratives; they ask for space, respect and integrity. In the same way Ossennontion and Skonaganleh:ra want to "braid together the past, present and future," King wants to braid together both Native and non-Native texts, and the differences between Native men and women, in order to strengthen Native communities. King's Native stories never attempt to transpose or absorb the western narratives they intermingle with. Instead, he uses parody to reveal the distinctness of both texts, and reminds us of the fact that Native stories have been unfairly subjugated by white western stories since colonization. Using parody, he decenters white texts to show that the "emperor has no clothes": white Christian patriarchal narratives have no justification for the dominance they have claimed over Native stories. Most importantly, since "minding your relations" means looking after the relationships shared between *all* Native and non-Native, living and non-living beings, it would offend Native values to transpose or overthrow anyone or anything.

It is significant that for the most part, it is the women in King's novels who engage in parody and resistance. Since Native women are twice removed from the centre of white, male power, they are in the best location to offer critiques of the status quo. In The Canadian Postmodern, Linda Hutcheon notes that parody, or intertextuality in general, is a useful tool in feminist writing since it "seeks a feminine literary space while still acknowledging (however grudgingly) the power of the (male/universal) space in which it cannot avoid, to some extent, operating" (110). Hutcheon points out the problem

with parody when she states that "parody is as compromised as it is potentially revolutionary: it always acknowledges the power of that which it parodies, even as it challenges it" (110). Although they must engage in what Hutcheon calls "a paradoxically complicitous critique" (111) of dominant western, Christian and patriarchal narratives, each of the women in King's novels manage to affirm and assert the primacy of Native values such as personal autonomy and community, and suggest the possibility of strong positions outside the Western Christian patriarchal tradition. King's women are never entirely "complicit" because they always engage in their critique on Native terms. At the same time they might acknowledge white power by parodying it, they also assert Native power by framing the parody in terms of Native humour, symbols and stories.

As they "braid together" the differences between male and female, Native and non-Native, the women in King's novels overturn stereotypes about "Indians" and seek out a modern, feminine "literary space". Here, Paula Gunn Allen's definition of the "concept in relation" is useful to describe the way Native women must reconcile (or braid together) "traditional tribal definitions of women with industrial and postindustrial non-Indian discourses" (Sacred Hoop 43). The "concept in relation" is "the understanding that the individualized -- as distinct from the individualistic -- sense of self accrues only within the context of community" (Sacred Hoop 314). The strands in a braid are not separate (individualistic), but woven together (individualized).

In Green Grass, Running Water, Norma and Lionel's mother both demonstrate the

principle of the "concept in relation" as they work to strengthen the Blossom community. Both women are *ninauposkitzpxpe* figures<sup>1</sup>. Norma and Lionel's mother are elders in the community, and they are both highly respected and spiritual women. Norma always has a teepee at the Sun Dance and it is she who "minds her relations" when she organizes everyone to rebuild her mother's and Eli's cabins<sup>2</sup> after the dam bursts. Norma offers advice and guidance to rather pitiful and powerless men like Eli and Lionel. Lionel's mother is renowned for her extraordinary cooking (GGRW 81, 170). She can take post-colonial recipes like Tortino de Carciofi with Ribollita and, with a few deft subversions/substitutions, produce a meal which people "had to admit was tasty" (GGRW 81). Lionel asks:

"What is it?"  
 "Vegetable soup and an artichoke omelet."  
 "Where'd you get the artichokes?"  
 "I had to substitute."  
 "So, what's in it now?"  
 "Elk." (81)

Later, Lionel's mother cooks Hawaiian Curdle Surprise: "You're supposed to use octopus for the stock, but where are you going to find octopus around here?". Her solution is to braid in some Native ingredients: "Moose works just as well" (GGRW 170). Lionel's mother approaches a post-colonial recipe with a playfully postmodern strategy: she uses familiar Native ingredients which reconfigure the recipe in an entirely new (and

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<sup>1</sup>Please see Chapter One, page 39 for a definition of the *ninauposkitzpxpe*.

<sup>2</sup> Eli's mother built the cabin herself. In his fight to prevent the construction of the dam, the cabin represent's Eli's cultural and maternal heritage and the hope that such technologies (which have the power to obliterate Native land and Native people) might be stopped forever.

successful) way. More than attempting to mimic the recipe, she deconstructs the ingredient list and reconstructs it on her own, Native terms. These wonderfully humorous moments contain a powerful message: Native peoples, like Native recipes, need not be isolated from the rest of the world. They are not "Imaginary Indians" caught in the myths of a primitive, isolated and dying culture. Lionel's mother is innovative, Native, and a survivor. She can change and adapt things on her own terms to combine Native "ingredients" with other cultures (here, Italian and Hawaiian) to produce successful new recipes. In no way does she need to compromise herself, her ingredients, or her culture. This is a nourishing enterprise, both literally and figuratively.

The Dead Dog Cafe is another example of a Native woman's successful post-colonial recipe. When George, Latisha's "Sensitive New Age Husband" quits yet another job and decides to stay home and look after the kids, he tells her that "all the best cooks in the world are men" (GGRW 245). He purchases several impractical, time-consuming gourmet gadgets and produces a series of nearly inedible meals. George, who previously did not know how to cook, decides to bake bread every morning (GGRW 246-250). Shortly after he begins to cook, he stops, and then leaves: "At first Latisha was angry, and she spent the next two weeks at the restaurant burning eggs and banging pans until the rage passed" (GGRW 249). But then she gets on with her life and proves on her own terms that women are probably better cooks after all. Latisha works on healing the wounds George inflicted as she involves herself in her community and turns the Dead Dog Cafe into a raging success. Norma tells Lionel that Latisha "makes her own luck"

(GGRW 56). In addition, it seems that Latisha's efforts to teach her children to "mind their relations" are having an effect. Her eldest son Christian does not take after his father, but instead supports Latisha by cooking for his brother and sister and looking after them while she is at work.

The Dead Dog Cafe exemplifies the ideals of autonomy and competence in Blackfoot culture which Kehoe describes in her essay "Blackfoot Persons". Latisha is on her way to gaining the status of one of the *ninauposkitzpxpe* in Blossom as she reclaims her autonomy and sense of self-in-community through her participation in the Sun Dance and her subversive manipulation of Native stereotypes at the Dead Dog Cafe. She was once George's "Country", and his symbol of the "real Indian". But now, she deconstructs the myth of the "real Indian" as she parodies myths about the Blackfoot and encounters a whole parade of "tourists" who were also supposed to be "real Indians". At the Dead Dog Cafe, all are tourists in the country, and in the image, they all claimed to be "Natives" of.

At the Dead Dog, Latisha preys on the settler/tourist expectations about "real Indians" -- that Blackfoot are "savages" who eat dog meat. King even intertextualizes his own work when we learn that

she got Will Horse Capture over in Medicine River to make up a bunch of photographs like those you see in hunting and fishing magazines where a couple of white guys are standing over an elephant or holding up a lion's head or stretching out a long stringer of fish or hoisting a brace of ducks in each hand. Only in these photographs, it was Indians and dogs. Latisha's favorite was a photograph of four Indians on their buffalo runners chasing down a herd of Great Danes. (GGRW 109).



In Medicine River, Will takes photographs of Native elders, or "real Native people". But it would appear that he is just as adept at creating parodic images of "real Indians" for Latisha. One wonders exactly how he did it, but I think Harlen and Coyote (one and the same?) must have had something to do with it. The point is that Will's photographs, be they "real" or parodies, are both strands in the same braid. All of Will's photography is about telling Native stories through images. Both images are "truths" about Native peoples, keeping in mind that "there are no truths, only stories" (GGRW 391). One image of a Native does not transpose or counteract the other. They both braid together to form a Native kind of strength.

The recipes Latisha develops at the Dead Dog Cafe are an ironic commentary on the image of the imaginary Blackfoot. But again, her recipes for such things as "Dog du Jour, Houndburgers, Puppy Potpurri, Hot Dogs, Saint Bernard Swiss Melts with Doggie Doos and Deep Fried Puppy Whatnots" (GGRW 109) are not intended to place Native culture in opposition to white settler culture. The customers at the Dead Dog are Natives too. It's not just a tourist trap, it's a "nice local establishment with a loyal but small clientele *and* a tourist trap" (GGRW 108). This is what Tully would identify as "intercultural territory", where the joke about dogmeat is so obvious and so exaggerated that it's possible for everyone to get it. So unless you are as witless as Nelson Eddy, who starts to worry about a black lab he knew named Tecumseh as he stares down at his plate, there is no division between Native and white here. This is, as Laura Donaldson notes, a

"gentle and generous" kind of parody. The joke is big and broad enough for everyone to enjoy it. Unless you had a black lab named Tecumseh.

In terms of her role in the Blackfoot community, Alberta is also on her way to becoming a *ninauposkitzpxpe* figure as she exemplifies competence and autonomy in her teaching career. She also participates in the Sun Dance and affirms her close ties with the Blossom community. Alberta's desire to have a child is an expression of her need to fulfil her role as woman/creator. Her desire is not individualistic, but individualized; having a child is a way of "minding her relations", or connecting her with her responsibility to what Thomas King calls "the universal family". Marriage, as Alberta sees it, is optional, since her first experience with marriage threatened to destroy her autonomy: "I just want a child, I don't want a husband" (177). But Alberta must confront a dominant Christian and patriarchal narrative in the guise of the Fertility clinic when she attempts to be artificially inseminated: "Most of the clinics won't take single women. I think it's a question of morals" (177). It would appear that if Alberta wants to have a child, she will have to play by non-Natives rules, until Coyote throws out the rules and impregnates her in a terrific send-up of the Immaculate Conception. Mary was impregnated by GOD, the Ultimate Rule-Maker, and Alberta is impregnated by Coyote, the Ultimate Rule-Breaker.

The subversive power of the *ninauposkitzpxpe* figure culminates in the four mythic women: First Woman, Thought Woman, Changing Woman and Old Woman. Laura Donaldson writes that with each of the four stories where we find a mythic female

protagonist, "King attempts to displace and counteract the Christian transposition of aboriginal sign systems by rewriting one of its foundational narratives.... This intervention ironically enacts a kind of poetic justice" (28-29). In each parodic episode, the four mythic women resist and subvert both a dominant Christian patriarchal narrative and a post-colonial patriarchal narrative (the Lone Ranger story, Moby Dick, The Last of the Mohicans and Robinson Crusoe). As Linda Hutcheon describes, this is "one of the ways of investigating the position of women *within* the tradition, as a way of discovering possible positions *outside* that tradition" (The Canadian Postmodern 110). In these episodes, King employs postmodern intertextuality to expose and deconstruct Western Christian patriarchy from a post-colonial, Native, feminist point of view.

Not only does King employ intertextuality to weave together Native and non-Native texts, he also blends together many versions of Native stories. In other words, he does not make any claims for "narrative purity" for either the Native or the non-Native stories he re-tells. King is not trying, as many white signmakers have tried, to replace "lies" with "truths". He takes many versions of many stories and braids them together. Christians run into serious difficulties when they try to contend with the multiplicity of names for their God. Christianity is, after all, a *monotheistic* religion. In contrast, Paula Gunn Allen writes that the Native concept of "the spirit that pervades everything" has many names: "Old Spider Woman is one name for this quintessential spirit, and Serpent Woman is another. Corn Woman is one aspect of her, and Earth Woman is another, and what they have made together is called Creation, Earth, creatures, plants, and light"

(Sacred Hoop 11). To this end, King has not created four different characters in First Woman, Changing Woman, Thought Woman and Old Woman. These are individualized, not individualistic, entities. Moreover, their genders must not be understood in the limited western sense of male and female. As Paula Gunn Allen notes, "Thought Woman is not limited to a female role.... since she is the supreme Spirit, she is both Mother and Father to all people and to all creatures. She is the only creator of thought, and thought precedes creation" (Sacred Hoop 15). In GGRW, the four old Indians also escape western gender categories, as we learn in this exchange between Sergeant Cereno and Dr. J. Hovaugh:

"These are very old men, patrolman."  
 "Women" said Sergeant Cereno. "And it's sergeant"  
 "Sorry," said Dr. Hovaugh. "What's this about women?"  
 "Ms. Jones said that the Indians are women."  
 ...  
 Sergeant Cereno uncrossed his left leg and crossed his right leg. "So they're not women?"  
 "We hardly ever make that mistake." (GGRW 75)

Again, the four old Indians are not necessarily separate characters from the four mythic women. Like strands in King's story/braid, they are individualized, not individualistic.

"First Woman. Big Woman. Strong Woman"s first imperative is to "straighten up and mind your relations" (39). In other words, be moral. Think for yourself. And think of yourself in relation with everything around you. First Woman's story begins as a version of a Native Creation story. In The Sacred Hoop , Paula Gunn Allen cites both Seneca and Mohawk legends as she recounts the myth of

Sky Woman, (who) is catapulted into the void by her angry, jealous and fearful husband, who tricks her into peering into the abyss he has revealed by uprooting the tree of light (which embodies the power of woman) that grows near his lodge. Her terrible fall is broken by the Water Fowl who live in that watery void, and they safely deposit Sky Woman on the back of Grandmother Turtle, who also inhabits the void. On the body of Grandmother Turtle earth-island is formed. (15)

In GGRW, King calls Sky Woman First Woman, since through her he is able to juxtapose the myth of Sky Woman with the myth of Eve, the first woman in the Christian creation myth in Genesis. In this story, First Woman is required to be a character in both stories at the same time.

In King's version of the Native Creation, First Woman is not banished into the void by a jealous husband. Instead, when she walks around looking for things that are bent and need fixing, she falls off the edge of the world. The water animals "mind their relations" when they fly up and catch First Woman as she falls. First Woman ends up on Grandmother Turtle's back and the two decide they'd better "make some land" (GGRW 39). The land grows strong and beautiful when it follows First Woman and Grandmother Turtle's orders to "Straighten up" and "Mind your relations" (GGRW 39).

But the Sky Woman story collides (and combines) with the Genesis story when Coyote appears and says, "That is beautiful... but what we really need is a garden" (GGRW 39). Leave it to Coyote to bend things. God, of course, agrees with the garden suggestion and First Woman reappears in her garden with Ahdamn, where "everything is perfect. And everything is beautiful. And everything is boring" (GGRW 40). Ahdamn,

of course, is not Adam, the most perfect creation made in God's image. No. Ahdamn is what you say when you make a stupid mistake. In this story, GOD is the one who breaks the rules. GOD acts as if he has no relations when he tells Eve "All this stuff is mine. I made it" and "Don't eat my nice red apples" (GGRW 68). In this episode, King reconstructs the story of the Garden of Eden from a Native point of view. He parodies the hierarchical and patriarchal Christianity and asserts the Native values of community and autonomy. First Woman and Ahdamn both literally and figuratively leave the garden to find new positions outside the Western Christian patriarchal traditions where Native values can thrive.

As soon as First Woman and Ahdamn leave the creation story, they wander into another western narrative. This time, it really is a Western western, complete with cowboys, Indians, and a lot of dead rangers. A group of live rangers appears and says "it looks like the work of Indians" (70) and accuses First Woman and Ahdamn of murder. But First Woman deftly weaves herself into their story by producing a black mask and disguising herself as the Lone Ranger, with Ahdamn as Tonto. This ploy works again later on (100), when she and Ahdamn are arrested by soldiers and taken to Fort Marion. In order to protect herself, First Woman adapts herself to fit the story she is forced to be a character in. She asserts her Native values and refuses to play by white rules, but she does not directly engage with the white sign system she is thrust into. She goes along with it in order to preserve herself, and then she escapes.

When Changing Woman lands on Noah's "canoe full of poop", she is "doubly colonized". As a woman, she is subjected to Noah's sexual harassment: "Lemme see your breasts, says Noah. I like women with big breasts. I hope God remembered that" (145), and as an Indian, she commits the "error" of talking to the animals: "This is a Christian ship. Animals don't talk. We got rules" (145). "Rules" mean that there is only room for one story, and one set of symbols, and one way of understanding them. When there are rules, one sign system can transpose and overthrow another one. But Changing Woman says "We got to get rid of those rules" (147). She begins her campaign to subvert these "rules" by eluding Noah's pursuit. Her resilience wins out, and she exhausts Noah. While GOD offended the Native values of autonomy and community in the First Woman story, Noah's approach to Changing Woman is sacrilegious. As Donaldson points out, "Changing Woman conjures Mother Earth herself and, through this link, engenders respect toward women" (37). Noah offends both the earth and the sacred position of women. He decides that there's "no point in having rules if some people don't obey them" and he loads all the animals into his canoe and sails away, leaving Changing Woman alone on the island with one more intertextual reference as he leaves: "If you can't follow our Christian rules, then you're not wanted on the voyage." (GGRW 148) In Timothy Findley's novel, women and animals also band together to resist Noah's patriarchal and genocidal "rules".

When Changing Woman encounters Captain Ahab and Moby Jane, the Great Black Whalesbian, she leaves with Jane. Again, this action is an assertion of the

possibility of a space outside of patriarchal narrative where Native, and other value systems can thrive. In Ahab's "Christian world", "We only kill things that are useful (whales), or things we don't like (lesbians)" (196). *Changing Woman*, however, views the world according to the Native terms of balanced reciprocity and minding your relations in accordance with the connection shared with all beings. Ahab catches whales and kills them. *Changing Woman* does as she is told and looks for whales. But when she finds Jane, the Black Whale, *Changing Woman* abandons ship. The fact that she has a lesbian experience with Jane shows us that Natives were not the only people who were devastated by colonization. In *The Sacred Hoop*, Paula Gunn Allen writes about the ritual status of homosexuals in Native societies before colonization. Although responses vary from tribe to tribe, for the most part, gays and lesbians in Native communities were never labelled as deviants. Finally, *Changing Woman* sends up the famous saying, "I have seen God and *she is black*" when she tells Ahab and his crew: "That's not a white whale. That's a female whale and she is black".

Thought Woman is again thrown into a Christian narrative where she must conform with the Rules. This episode parodies both the Christian story of the Immaculate Conception and the Government story of "How the Natives Signed the Land Claim". This combination of the two stories makes the point that the Canadian government *wishes* they could claim that the birth of Canada was a sort of Immaculate Conception, and rid themselves of the fact that, in essence, the land already belonged to Native peoples. But the story of the Immaculate Conception is, in itself, very problematic because of the



idealized and impossible image of woman it presents. Thought Woman resists this double colonization. She is presented with a "virgin verification form", told where she will have the baby, and then told to "stand over there next to that snake" (GGRW 271). A.A. Gabriel tries to make Thought Woman/Mary return to Canada's conception and force her to agree to have a pure "virgin" birth. A.A.'s business card gives away his real intentions as it sings "Hosanna da, our home on Natives' land" (270).

Thought Woman refuses to sign the paper and pose with the snake, thereby refusing to comply with Christianity's narrow definition of woman, and Canada's desire to cover up its theft of Native lands. According to these Christian narratives, women are either Eve figures and therefore whores, or Mary figures, and therefore virgins. As a Native, Thought Woman resists colonization by refusing to sign the White Paper, whose deep voice promises land rights "as long as the grass is green and the waters run". Again, she runs away, to affirm the possibility of Native values outside these colonizing narratives. When she meets Robinson Crusoe, she resists the Imaginary Indian stereotype of the savage Other when she refuses to be Crusoe's Friday. Crusoe tells her that "As a civilized white man, it has been difficult not having someone of color around whom I could educate and protect" (294). She refuses to be that "someone of color" and leaves. Again, she does not attempt to fight fire with fire by attempting to re-colonize Robinson Crusoe. She simply resists, and rejects his version of things and then lets the story deconstruct on its own.

Finally, Old Woman resists and subverts the Christian myth that God gained mastery over Nature. Even though this is the fourth mythic story in the novel, Coyote tells us "I know this story. I can tell this story. This is the same story" (329). Again, King combines several Native myths when Old Woman chases Tender Root and falls through a hole in the sky. But the story she falls into is the story of when Jesus Christ walked on water. Even though Natives accept that there are many versions of their stories, it would be heresy for a Christian to believe that the Bible might also be a highly intertextual document. Natives can braid together their many stories and find strength. But Christians unravel when more than one version of a sacred story appears. Christian dogmatism has also inspired generations of archaeologists to dig up tangible proof of the place where the Red Sea actually parted, or where Noah's ark might have landed.

When she encounters Young Man Walking on Water, Old Woman tries to "mind her relations" when she offers to help Young Man find his fishing boat. Young Man rudely refuses her help, and then patronizes her: "So that you're not confused... I am now going to walk across the water to that vessel. I am going to calm the seas and stop all the agitation" (350). When his plan to master Nature fails, Old Woman offers to help again, and he grows even more angry: "There you go again.... Trying to tell me what to do" (351). Old Woman admonishes him: "Well, someone has to. You are acting as if you have no relations. You shouldn't yell at those happy Waves. You shouldn't shout at that jolly Boat. You got to sing a song" (351). From Old Woman's Native perspective, Young Man demonstrates bad manners. Not only does he claim her innate female power

(her song, which calms the waves) as his own, but he tries to assert his superiority in a world where human beings and nature function together in relationship, not in terms of dominator and dominated.

Finally, Old Woman finds herself in an intertextual version of The Last of the Mohicans, with Nasty Bumppo, Post-Colonial Wilderness Guide and Outfitter. Bumppo tells her she must be his Indian friend Chingachook and goes on to tell her about "white gifts" and "Indian gifts" and the differences between the two. According to Bumppo, Indians have "a keen sense of smell" and they can run fast. Moreover: "Indians can endure pain. Indians have quick reflexes. Indians don't talk much. Indians have good eyesight. Indians have agile bodies" (327). Whites, on the other hand, are "compassionate... patient. Whites are spiritual. Whites are cognitive. Whites are philosophical. Whites are sophisticated. Whites are sensitive" (328). Bumppo's comments parallel George's diatribe about the superiority of Americans and the inferiority of Canadians (131-34). Both Nasty Bumppo and George set out to polarize the differences between whites and Natives, Canadians and Americans. Their abrupt statements irrevocably divide and stereotype people and make it difficult to braid together any differences.

Although King does not explicitly do this, it would be easy to apply George and Nasty Bumppo's formula to explain the differences between men and women as well: men are rational, women are emotional, men are strong, women are weak, men are good

at sports, women are good at needlework etc. The qualities assigned to either group, (men or women, Canadians or Americans, Native and non-Native) are not inherently superior or inferior. The dominant group claims the privilege to assign these random characteristics and therefore elect the dominant group's superiority over the other group. This is another form of a process which Terry Goldie calls "signmaking", where the "play between white and indigene", or Canadian and American, or man and woman, "is a replica of the black and white squares [of a chessboard], with clearly limited oppositional rules" (Goldie 10).

Medicine River's Harlen Bigbear is an example of King's attempt to break down such oppositions, assert the Native value of community, and braid together the differences between men and women. If the definition of a *ninauposkitzpxpe*<sup>3</sup> is a "manly-hearted woman" (and again, it is important to note that Algonkian languages do not distinguish male and female through lexical gender), then perhaps Harlen Bigbear could be called a "womanly-hearted man". In an interview with Constance Rooke, King states:

Harlen rarely reacts the way you expect a typical male to react... [He] has to use what I suppose is a more feminine approach to that world and remind people of their responsibilities and their obligations. Suggest things that they should do. It is a softer and tenderer method of arranging the whole community. That is what Harlen's about. (6)

The *ninauposkitzpxpe* is a respected elder within the Native community whose degree of

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<sup>3</sup>Here, I am again drawing on Kehoe's work "Blackfoot Persons" which I explain in more detail in Chapter One, p. 39

autonomy and success is measured by the fact that she "minds her relations." The ninauposkitzpxpe possesses an innate spiritual power, and exists with other beings in terms of a balanced reciprocity (Women and Power in Native North America 12-14).

Klein and Ackerman note that in Native communities, gender roles are not usually at odds with each other, but work symbiotically within the community. Harlen Bigbear shows an extraordinary sensitivity for this community symbiosis. When Will sees Harlen at Jake Pretty Weasel's funeral, he remarks: "Harlen was there because there was a funeral. It was Harlen's way of keeping track. And seeing him at funerals and weddings, bad times and good, was somehow reassuring " (MR 47). Later, Will also notes that "Harlen went to everything. He went to all the powwows. He went to all the funerals. He went to all the weddings, the births, and most of the court cases. Any time there was a gathering of two or more Indians in a hundred-mile radius of Medicine River, chances were one them was Harlen" (MR 89).

Harlen works tirelessly as the Medicine River matchmaker. Matchmaking is at the heart of minding your relations, since it ensures the survival and continuance of the community. A successful marriage can be the best example of balanced reciprocity, where a woman and a man can exist symbiotically in the community. Marriage is not an absolute necessity though, as Alberta, Latisha and Louise all prove. A good marriage depends on a balance between male and female, but very few of the men in King's novels are capable (yet) of holding up their end of things. Harlen is especially keen to convince

Will to return to Medicine River, get married, and settle down for good. His choice for Will is Louise Heavyman: "Good looking woman, Will. Strong hips. You know, for children. Tall, too. Always good to have a tall woman." Harlen's wisdom on marriage ranges from the ideal: "A man's not complete until he has a woman by his side. Nothing more important than the family"; to the imaginary: "A son of yours would probably be a sports star of some sort"; to the practical: "Beats the hell out of eating your own cooking" (MR 27).

In terms of his spiritual power, Harlen is definitely a "womanly-hearted man". His ability to mind his relations extends to an uncanny sense of how others are feeling and what they might need. Will remembers:

the night I came in from Toronto, getting off the plane in Medicine River, and walking towards the lights in the terminal. I was almost to the doors when I saw Harlen leaning against the glass, looking as though he hadn't moved in all the months I had been gone. And as I stepped into the terminal, I remember wondering just how long he had been standing there waiting. (MR 102)

In the interview with Constance Rooke, King admits that he "sort of stole" this scene from Michael Ondaatje's poem "Bear Hug":

Griffin calls to me to come and kiss him goodnight  
I yell ok. finish something I'm doing,  
then something else, walk slowly round  
the corner to my son's room.  
He is standing arms outstretched  
waiting for a bearhug. Grinning.

Why do I give my emotion an animal's name,

Give it the dark squeeze of death?  
 This is the hug which collects  
 all his small bones and his warm neck against me.  
 The thin tough body under the pyjamas  
 locks to me like a magnet of blood.

How long was he standing there  
 like that, before I came?

Michael Ondaatje  
The Cinnamon Peeler: Selected Poems p. 75

Harlen's hug is indeed very Bigbear. His tenacious insistence on minding his relations and shoring up his community is a collective hug that locks everyone he knows together like a "magnet of blood". His compassion for others is almost uncanny: "Harlen had an ear for depression. He could hear it, he said. "You know, Will, women can hear their babies even before they start to cry. And Barney Oldperson's dog, Skunker, can hear Barney's half-ton coming across the river eight miles away. And people all the time are saying that they can hear a pin drop" (MR 103). His remedy? "A hot shower is great for depression. In the old days, we used to have regular sweats just for that reason" (MR 106). Harlen not only makes frequent references to "the old days", but maintains close contact with elders in his community like Granny Oldcrow. He often makes reference to Native stories and sacred sites. When Will returns to Medicine River, Harlen offers this reflection on life in Toronto: "Can't see Ninastiko from Toronto... Chief Mountain. That's how we know where we are. When we can see the mountain, we know we're home. Didn't your mother ever tell you that?" (MR 93).

In no way is Harlen "stuck" in nostalgia for a Native past: he is a thoroughly

postmodern Native. When he names his basketball team the Medicine River Friendship Centre Warriors (MR 12), he uses the Imaginary Indian image of the Native "warrior" but combines it with the modern Native concept of the Friendship Centre. When he describes his best player, Clyde Whiteman, he says : "Great player, Will. He can jump. Slam dunk the ball. Quick as Cree" (12). The Cree were not traditionally known for their prowess in basketball, but for Harlen, the same skills can apply on new, postmodern terms.

In Chapter Eleven of Medicine River, Harlen and Will make a subtle discovery about manhood when Harlen's macho brother Joe arrives in town. When Will is introduced to Joe, he tells us: "There are people, whites mostly, who understand handshaking as a blood sport. The trick is to give them fingers and no more. Joe caught my hand by surprise" (MR 147). Joe is a hard-drinking, cigar-chewing, Australian pig-stalking man's man. Harlen is somewhat embarrassed by his brother and his tall tales, but under protest, accompanies him back to the bridge they used to jump off for fun as boys. Will goes along too, because he is curious to discover more about Harlen's relationship with Joe. The three undertake a hair-raising climb up onto a bridge girder about a hundred feet above the river. For no other reason than re-living his adolescent male stunt, Joe jumps off the bridge. Harlen and Will contemplate the jump, and the climb back down, and realize that they are literally out on a limb, or at least a girder. The climb back down is even more challenging than the climb up:

We never told anyone about the bridge. It was our secret, Harlen and me.



By the time we got home, we had agreed that Joe had taken the easy way, that climbing down was harder than jumping... We never went back to the bridge. At least, I never did. I was satisfied with the first adventure -- the river miles below me, the wind whipping around the girder, Joe letting go of everything and Harlen and me, perched on that narrow piece of steel like a pair of barn owls, holding on for dear life. (MR 164)

Joe's stunt is a very individualistic action. It is the kind of thing that says "Look what *I* can do, and what risks *I* can take" for no other reason than the fact that he wants to do it and he can. And he's still drunk, which also helps. But Harlen and Will stick together, and although they do not mention it out loud, the risk they would take by jumping must be obvious. And neither of them are so self-centred to desire that kind of thrill. The real challenge lies in rejecting Joe's type of individualistic macho exploits and choosing to climb back down. In Kings' novels, there are many men like Joe who choose to "let it all go" and jump. They are abusive husbands who desert their wives, like Jake Pretty Weasel and George Morningstar. But Harlen and Will decide to "hold on for dear life" to a different kind of masculinity and climb back down and go home to Medicine River. After his big jump, Joe leaves again. It's probably best for the community that men like Joe do not stick around.

Harlen, however, invests his energy in helping his community and maintaining the connections between people. Just as the women in King's novels braid things together, Harlen is also a expert weaver:

Helping was Harlen's specialty. He was like a spider on a web. Every so often, someone would come along and tear off a piece of web or poke a hole in it, and Harlen would come scuttling along and throw out filament

until the damage was repaired. Bertha over at the Friendship Centre called it meddling. Harlen would have thought of it as general maintenance. (MR 31)

Sometimes Harlen does meddle. King calls Harlen "the trickster figure, rearranged in some ways" (Rooke 6). Like Coyote in GGRW, Harlen's role is to try to "fix the world", but as often as he is a creator and a repairer, he can also be a destroyer. But like the women in Medicine River and Green Grass Running Water, Harlen is devoted to weaving and braiding together the connections between people in order to maintain the strength of the community. As a womanly-hearted man, Harlen represents a step for all Native men towards braiding together the differences between male and female so that the Blackfoot ideal of balanced reciprocity might return to modern Native communities. Harlen is driven by a feminine, coyote-like sense that the world as it is today is definitely in need of fixing. He tells Will that "'People are fragile. Doesn't take much to break something. Starfish are lucky, you know. You break off one of their arms, and it grows back. I saw it on television'" (MR 31).

The ability to heal both individuals and communities, or to "grow back another arm" like Harlen's starfish, is derived from the Native values of "minding your relations," balanced reciprocity, and braiding together differences. The women (and the womanly-hearted) in King's novels provide many creative examples of the ways both people and stories can bridge the gaps which separate them. The idea of difference, whether it is the difference between a woman and a man, a Native and a non-Native, or a Native story and a western story, must be understood under the premise that "there are no truths, only

stories" (GGRW 391). In Native terms, different elements do not transpose or counteract each other, because all things are parts of a greater whole: everything and everyone is individualized, not individualistic. Therefore, women and men, Natives and non-Natives, western stories and Native stories can all be braided together in order to overcome the history of white oppression and heal both communities and individuals.

## *Conclusion*

### *"There are no truths, only stories": The Native Alternative*

I am convinced that this morning Coyote delivered the Globe and Mail to my doorstep herself. I had been working on the conclusion for this thesis, and thinking about how I could extend my discussion of Thomas King's writing to address the question of difference and Native values in Canada. And there it was, on page D9 of the Focus section of the February 28, 1998 issue: a picture of the Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, Phil Fontaine, holding chopsticks and eating a bowl of Japanese udon noodles. The photograph accompanies an interview with Fontaine about the Native perspective on immigration in Canada. Among other efforts to "tighten up" and "reassess" immigration in Canada, the government has recently proposed that people seeking to immigrate should be proficient in English or French, or have sufficient funds to pay for their own language tuition. Fontaine responds that "what [this] reflects is a dominant society's perspective. It shows a complete disregard for the history of this country." Those in power who design policies like these are forgetting the fact that they are descended from immigrants who also did not speak the languages of the Aboriginal inhabitants of Canada. No one told the Europeans to start learning Cree before they sailed for North America. Nor did they have to pay for Ojibway classes. But now the government wants to regulate the 'assimilation' of newcomers into the 'native' population of Canada by speaking the 'native' tongues of English and French. Again, non-Native Canadians are attempting to make a "native"

claim to this country. But Native peoples themselves would never assume such superiority. Fontaine continues, "it's not that [Native peoples] want immigrants to speak our languages, but to know of them, and about the place of indigenous peoples in their new country.... there is a fear of people who are different. That has been our burden."

In King's novels, the "burden of difference" is born by Native women (and men, to a lesser extent) as they resist the dominant society's monolithic assumptions about culture and gender. But King makes the point of including other female characters like GGRW's Connie the cop and Babo (the black hospital janitor who befriends the four Old Indians) and MR's Mrs. Oswald to show that Native women are not the only ones who are marginalized and disempowered. But the Native women in King's novels are perhaps in the best position to resist and overthrow oppression in order to re-imagine and transform the world because they can achieve these goals on Native terms. The struggle these women undertake cannot be explained in terms of a battle between two opposing world views since, while the dominant culture in Canada fears difference, Native culture affirms and embraces difference. The Native understanding of difference is grounded in a moral code which values both community and personal autonomy, and emphasizes the importance of "minding your relations". And for Natives, "relations" extend beyond family and relatives to the relationships shared with all living and non-living things. Consequently, minding your relations means acknowledging everyone who shares this country and this world. The status of racial, ethnic and linguistic minorities in Canada is therefore a matter of concern for Native peoples.

Members of the dominant culture in Canada, who are, for the most part white, English speaking heterosexual males, have laid the burden of difference on the shoulders of those who are not the 'right' gender or culture, or speak the 'right' language, or love the 'right' people. Like a huge, stubborn cyclops, those in power have never learned that it is impossible to understand the world from one comprehensive point of view. These new proposed immigration policies demonstrate that this cyclops is alive and well. When the interviewer asks if all non-Natives can be viewed as immigrants, Fontaine replies: "At some point, sure. We were here first -- sovereign nations -- and we welcomed and supported our brothers and sisters from across the sea. We always believed in peaceful co-existence. It was always understood that what we had here was to be shared." But "[the newcomers] didn't understand the people welcoming them. They viewed them as people who had to be changed to fit the mould they were bringing with them."

Fontaine's words echo First Woman when she tells GOD : "There's plenty of stuff here. We can share it" (GGRW 68). And the newcomers to Canada sound just like GOD when he tells First Woman his rules: "this is my world and this is my garden" (68). Not only should this Canadian garden be shared between Natives and whites, but also with "all my relations" including those of different ethnic and racial backgrounds. Fontaine explains that a Native policy on immigration would be "guided by age-old traditions and values. These values are embodied in the Cree word *pawow*, which means 'there's room.' We never wanted to deny anyone their place, to displace or dispossess anyone."

The "room" Fontaine refers to in *pawow* is what James Tully might call

"intercultural common ground," in which the "politics of recognition" occur; that is, the meeting of different cultures, different stories and different people on terms which not only allow a view of each others' different perspectives, but magically reveal an infinite number of other perspectives at the same time. When James Tully walks around Bill Reid's sculpture, 'The Spirit of Haida Gwaii' and contemplates the thirteen *sghaana*, he marvels at the way the endless perspectives and interrelations within and between the figures "awaken the play of [his]imagination from dogmatic slumber" (Strange Multiplicity 22). For me, reading and laughing with Thomas King has a similar effect. King and his characters offer instruction in the Native ability to see and understand the world from multiple points of view, or "aspectively." From Harlen Bigbear and Rose's box of photographs and letters in MR to the Dead Dog Cafe, Lionel's mother's kitchen, and the escapades of the four mythic Women in GGRW , King demonstrates that "there are no truths, only stories." All of these characters work to define a space, or intercultural common ground, where there is room for multiple points of view and where imagination and laughter push dogma out the door.

As Tully states: "Aboriginal nations, in the face of appalling social and economic conditions, have sought not only to resist and interact, but to rebuild and reimagine their cultures; to 'celebrate their survival'" (Strange Multiplicity 21). In order to achieve these goals, Native demands for cultural recognition must be met. If, for example, Native leaders had input into immigration policy, Fontaine forsees "recognition of our rightful place and contribution as a founding nation, and contribution of our language and culture

as critical to Canada. If immigration policy is going to be realistic and rooted in history, we ought to be involved." In other words, if Native culture were considered to be "critical to Canada" and could actually affect public policy, then we might all learn to "mind our relations", and find intercultural common ground, or "*room/pawow*" for difference. As I look a little harder at the picture of Phil Fontaine and his Japanese noodles, I can see something else poking out of the bowl. And now I see: Lionel's mother made him that soup. And she ran out of tofu. So she used caribou.



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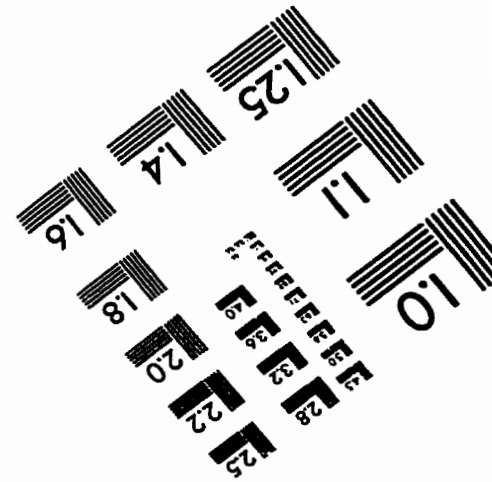
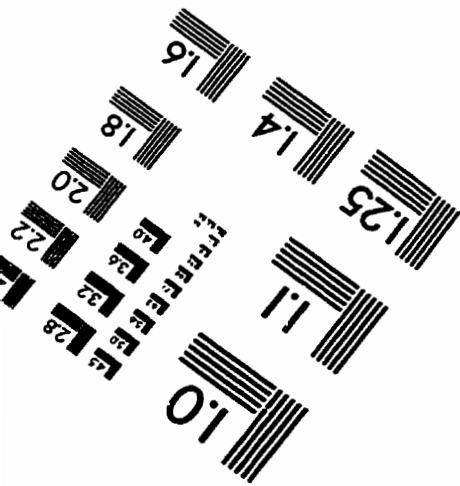
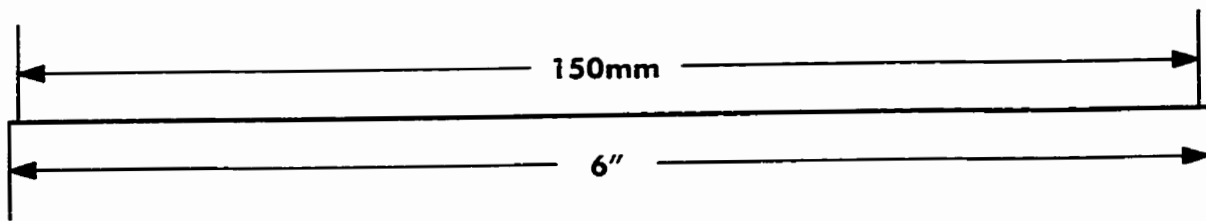
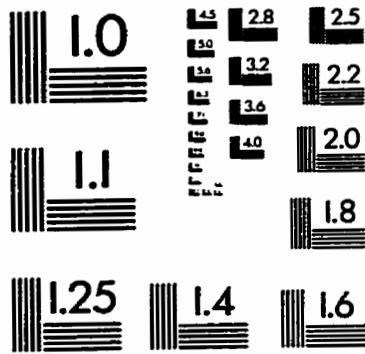
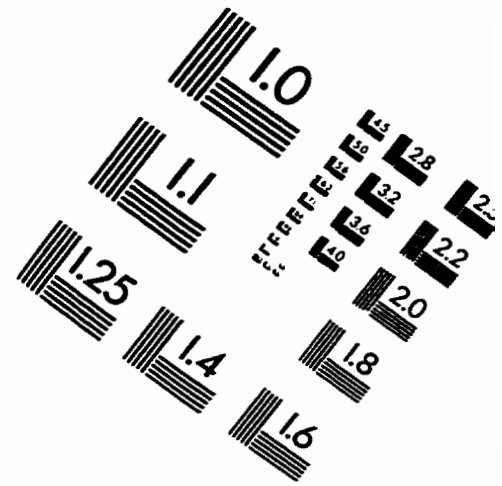
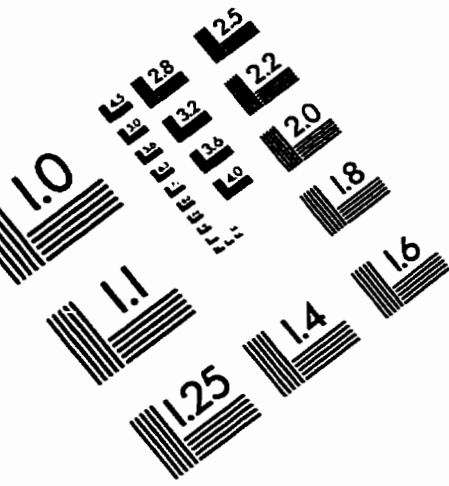
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