

Dances with Coyote: Narrative Voices in Thomas King's *One Good Story, That One*

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Clearing a Conversational Critical Voice

—*So. You know that book by Thomas King I told you I was going to read?*

—*One Good Story, That One?*

—*Yeah, that's the one.*

—*Such a great title!*

—*Well, it sure is an appropriately tricky one. Made me expect a novel, not ten stories. And they don't all add up to one larger story, either. There are pretty different versions of reality alongside one another in the various stories.*

—*What do you mean exactly? Like in Green Grass, Running Water?*

—*Like that only more so, because King adds science fiction to the mix in one story about petrified Indians being abducted by blue space coyotes.*

—*Not green?*

—*No, guess they're not native to Mars! Some of the stories are realistic but others add mythic dimensions to the realism in a kind of augmented reality. Early on, King introduces Old Coyote, then lets him make tracks all over the pages. Sometimes that book sounds like a Native oral storyteller talking, and other times... well, it sounds more like a book. Guess that's a lot like Native people nowadays. They don't all talk the same way either. And lots of Native writers are using so-called Red Englishes.*

—*Yeah, like Cree poet Louise Halfe using Creenglish in her "Pope" poems—but she also writes in more standard English.*

—*Right, and Maria Campbell's Stories of the Road Allowance People are all in the village English of her father's generation, plus the book gives you a sense of interaction between storyteller and audience. King gives you that, too, but in a different way. More thematically than stylistically, though, at least in this book. And, one of the best things in Wagamese's Keeper 'n Me is the way Keeper and Garnet talk.*

—*Yeah, and "Heh, Heh, Heh," I just love Keeper's laugh.*

—*Course, there's also the way Wagamese shows the context and roles of Nishnab storytelling and ceremonial language on the White Dog reserve. Lotsa Native writers draw on oral TRA-DISH-UNN in their work, too. Like King's use of the Earth Diver story to open each of the four sections of Green Grass, Running Water.*

—Umm-hmm. And the five Massey lectures, too. Did you hear them?

—Yes! The way he showed how a story changes at least a little with every telling was really effective. And the opening and closing formulas—
“There’s a story I know” and “Take it. It’s yours. Do with it what you will. Only don’t say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you’d heard it before. You’ve heard it now”—they show how much King’s discourse is shaped by oral storytelling.

—Anyway, don’t you think King’s use of the Earth Diver story is in some ways like Beth Brant’s use of the same basic creation story in *“This is History,”* except hers is more tied to her own people’s territory? King being part Cherokee, part Greek, and part Swiss German—not to mention an academic and a long way from home when he was in Blackfoot country—seems to me more pan-Indian in his approach. But he, Brant, and the Inuit writer and artist...?

—Ipellie?

—Yeah, Alootook Ipellie. His *“Summit with Sedna”* uses one of his people’s most important myths to write about issues facing his community today. Same thing with King and a lot of other writers. And of course King has a lot of fun—and makes a lot of meaning—with Coyote, just like other Aboriginal writers. You read Annharte’s *Coyote Columbus Café*? Speaking of café, do you want to get a refill on the coffee?

—Sure. On both counts.... And there’s Keeshig-Tobias’s *“Trickster beyond 1992,”* too.

—And Highway’s *Nanabush*. Funny, in some ways King’s Coyote and Highway’s trickster seem closer to the figure in some traditional stories I’ve read than either Annharte’s Coyote or Keeshig-Tobias’s *Nanabush*, despite the women being more tribally rooted than King anyway. But my point is that King is not alone in what he’s doing with the oral. None of them do it exactly like any other one, though.

—Yeah, I see what you mean.

—Anyway, his ten good stories talk about what life is like for Native people today. They’re funny, and they’re sad, and they’re really political, too. Even though King says in the *“Godzilla vs. Postcolonial”* essay that Native writing is not primarily concerned with writing back to the colonizing or neo-colonizing peoples, I think his representations of Native people inevitably challenge Western stereotypes and norms.

—Like what?

—Like about Native people, the sacred, and what’s real and what has authority.¹ But what’s just as important as what the stories say is how they say it. Many voices speak from the book’s pages. And that is part of what

¹ Sharon Bailey argues in *“The Arbitrary Nature of the Story: Poking Fun at Oral and Written Authority in Thomas King’s *Green Grass, Running Water*”* that the juxtaposition of seemingly oral and written styles of narration work to subvert the idea of one style being better than the other at conveying meaning. Her observation applies just as well to King’s short story collection.

the book has to say. So somehow, it makes you want to kind of talk about it even when you're writing about it.

—You're going to do that?

—I'm thinking about it. It'd be kind of fun to play with the voices in the stories.

—You'd have to be careful not to appropriate Aboriginal voices, though.

—I know there's a danger there.

—Especially because King bases his oral style so much on Harry Robinson's, and Robinson grew up inside Okanagan oral tradition.

—But I wonder if there isn't room for an occasional sentence or two in the style of the oral storyteller of some of King's stories. I mean as a kind of tribute to the liveliness and memorability of his or her voice—King makes the gender deliberately ambiguous—and the things she or he makes you think about. I've been hearing that voice in my head ever since I read the first story. So it's a fictional character's voice I'd be reproducing.

—I don't know, maybe.

—I really don't want to be white noise that drowns out Aboriginal voices² or disrespects protocol in any way, but I wouldn't be telling anyone else's stories, and I wouldn't try to speak in Coyote's voice. I would try to work in the spirit of what Cree writer Joy Asham Fedorick recommends in "Fencepost Sitting & How I Fell Off to One Side." I would aim to be one of those she says can look along Aboriginal people's beam of sunlight, journey in the same direction as they do, and not impose. And, you know, I just don't think it's ultimately respectful to pussyfoot around and not respond to an Aboriginal writer's work in the fullest and most creative ways I know how. And for me that means entering into the spirit of the work. And I do know King liked what the anthropologist Robin Ridington did in a somewhat similar vein in a piece about sharing stories with King. Heh, maybe we could write together if you read the book and liked it, and then you could tell me if you think I'm crossing the line in any way.

—Well, I sure liked Green Grass and Truth and Bright Water. I read more novels than short stories.

—If you loved those, for sure you're gonna love One Good Story, That One.

—Well, let me get my last batch of papers marked, then I'll read it and we can talk again.

—Deal.

Creating a Colloquy of Voices, or Trying to Dance with Coyote
But writing in a conversational style alone is not enough, either.³ When it comes to analysing text, there are some things a person just can't say in a

² See Susan Gingell, "When X Equals Zero: The Politics of Voice in First Peoples Poetry by Women."

³ Anthropologist Robin Ridington was first to use a colloquial voice in "Theorizing Coyote's Canon: Sharing Stories with Thomas King," which was at one point conceived as a piece "in the style of Coyote discourse [that...] King used in his novel [*Green Grass*,

textualized oral style. They seem foreign to it. Critical response to King's storytelling may need to be as poly-vocal as the collection itself if the spirit of the book is to be respected.

—*So, you curritics having trouble. Trying to dance with that sneaky one takes pretty fancy footwork.*

—*Yeah, you gotta adapt to a lot of different rhythms, and you just don't know where Coyote's gonna lead you. It's like trying not to get tangled in the trickster Ananse's web while following the storylines he spins in Ghanaian and Caribbean literatures.*

Around the world, writers with ancestral and on-going ties to predominantly if not exclusively oral peoples colonized by the literate European imperial nations are developing strategies to textualize the orature and orality of their people while simultaneously thematizing and enacting their story-telling practices. The reproduction of oral traditions and the representation of the oral story-telling situation in such literatures perpetuate forms of Indigenous verbal arts and at least some of their creative practices.

In "Writing Orality: Interpreting Literature in English by Aboriginal Writers in North America, Australia and New Zealand," Margery Fee argues that writers are textualizing the oral in response to a "cultural crisis of dispossession and forced linguistic assimilation" (24). Their main strategies, according to Fee, are substituting "textual markers of orality [...] for the near-extinct Aboriginal language" and assuming "the mantle of the oral storyteller." The argument is eminently persuasive until one considers that writers from other parts of the decolonizing world where Indigenous languages are in no danger of extinction write the oral with as great a frequency and using remarkably similar strategies as Aboriginal writers whose languages *are* threatened. The proverb-rich style and contextualized representation of ritual discourse and story-telling in the Nigerian classics *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe and *Death and the King's Horseman* by Wole Soyinka; the dramatic presentation of the Akan trickster Ananse in Efua Sutherland's *The Marriage of Anansewa*; the embedding of storyteller-audience interaction in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*; and the language of Nissim Ezekiel's "Poem in Very Indian English" and "Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa" are just a few examples of ways Anglophone writers whose Indigenous mother tongues remain healthy have engaged in textualizing of the oral. Yet the same phenomenon in distinct cultural situations can sometimes have distinct causes, so Fee could still be correct in her argument. Moreover, even though not all Aboriginal languages are nearly extinct, the reclaiming of

Running Water] (18). Ridington lets his readers know that he's aware he's an "Anthro" not an "Indian," and so, when academic discourse serves his purposes better than a conversational style, he uses the more formal way of writing, too. We have tried to follow his model in both respects.

oral traditions—and the land to which they are connected—and the often collocated valorization of previously pejorated varieties of English are widespread political imperatives for Aboriginal writers.⁴ Similarly, the continuation of traditional aesthetic practices is a common motivation for Indigenous writings of the oral.

—*Pretty fancy words, those ones. All dressed up for a big occasion. Maybe go to town, show off their jingle dresses. Could be people won't hear the part about the land.*

—*That would be wrong because even though King is not himself tribally rooted in the territory he's writing about, he has said he felt at home in Blackfoot territory, and in "One Good Story, That One," he makes an explicit point about how the names of things, like rivers within a territory, indicate a people's relationship to the land. Anyone in Indian country will tell you there are stories that go along with the names, and together they create what Kimberly Blaeser calls a tenured identity.*⁵

—*Yes, we must talk about the land for sure once we've talked a bit about the critical context of our work.*

Using *Green Grass, Running Water* to illustrate her case, Fee is the first to devote serious analysis to the oral dimensions of King's writing whereas most other critics characteristically devote a few sentences or paragraphs to these aspects. For example, in the two pages focusing on King's fictional treatment of Native oral traditions, the authors of *Border Crossings: Thomas King's Cultural Inversions* briefly document King's stylistic hybridizing of the oral and written, and his thematizing of White silencing of Native storytelling. They accord significantly more space to a discussion of King's extension of these traditions in his work for radio and television, "substitut[ing] contemporary media for traditional venues" (111), but they do not consider how such technological mediation constitutes another kind of textualizing of the oral in that it removes performance from a closed local community and the history and values at least most of its members share.

If King's books put him in good company in terms of not just Aboriginal, but also Indigenous writings of the oral—and *One Good Story, That One* is no exception—the book is exceptional in having attracted little critical commentary. A number of critics refer briefly to the book or

⁴ Though there is still no uniformity of terminology in the field, *Indigenous* seems to be the increasingly preferred term to refer to Aboriginal peoples internationally. In Canada, the term *Aboriginal* is widely used to designate First Nations, Metis, and Inuit peoples, though *Native* is also common in this context and a naming that King himself uses, along with *Indian*. Wherever possible we use a specific First Nations designation, but when referring to an international context choose *Indigenous*, and use *Aboriginal* and *Native* interchangeably for the Canadian and American contexts.

⁵ In a 1994 interview with Jeffrey Canton, King reported this feeling of being at home on the Alberta prairies (99). Blaeser's discussion of tenured identity can be found in her essay "Writing Voices Speaking: Native Authors and an Oral Aesthetic" (54).

individual stories, but only Teresa Gibert's "Narrative Strategies in Thomas King's Short Stories" makes the book the sole focus of attention. Gibert commends King's grafting of realism and mythic style (67), arguing that his frequent shifts in narrative voice and perspective reflect his desire to avoid stereotyping Native people (74). Despite using omniscient and first- and third-person narration, King clearly privileges dialogue, "especially free direct speech" (74), she writes, and she identifies—without exemplifying—his use of a number of "basic traditional oral narrative devices, such as word-repetitions, gaps, discontinuities, and a phatic rhetoric of address" (74). Why Gibert singles out the repetition of words—when phrases and syntactical structures are often repeated as well—is unclear, and she leaves King's often fragmentary and frequently additive syntax un-remarked. While accurately observing a difference in the idiom of the narrators of "One Good Story, That One," "Magpies," and "The One about Coyote Going West" on the one hand, and of "A Coyote Columbus Story" on the other, she observes that the latter "speaks fluid English" (74). Yet the syntax is often fragmentary, and the sometimes non-standard grammar ("I says," "You got to watch," "real sorry," and "That one must have been lonely. And Coyote begins to cry") are arguably a stylistic synecdoche for a working- or underclass-based ethnicized lect.

Other interpretations of the narrative voices and perspectives of *One Good Story* have aesthetic and thematic focuses. Herb Wyile's summation of King's narrative polyphony in *One Good Story, That One* praises "engaging variety" and the "series of alternative representations of cultural interaction" (113) it produces. Blanca Chester's account of what King learned from Okanagan storyteller Harry Robinson in particular and Native oral storytellers in general is part of her argument that storied dialogue is a form of Native theorizing. Writing about the interplay of Native- and Western-style stories in *Green Grass*, Chester argues that their interconnectedness—which we also observe in the alternative realities of the textualized oral and more conventionally literary stories of *One Good Story*—"shows meaning is always process-driven and consensual—how it is inherently dialogic" (47).

—*Okay. Maybe time to say what you curritics think.*

—*Right then, here's what we think.*

With consummate skill, King transports readers through perspectives on the nature of knowledge and being that simultaneously illuminate and allow for the crossing of boundaries of cultural difference. Those boundaries, Margery Fee and Jane Flick point out, are culturally constructed "by what you know and don't know" (131), but because some knowledge can extend analogically across borders to other networks of knowledge, Fee and Flick recommend following "Coyote pedagogy," a kind of teaching that "requires training in illegal border-crossing" (131).

King not only evades border guards, however, he also rewrites immigration policy, interrogating the fundamental precepts of borders. By first delineating difference and then allowing readers to associate for the reading time with the community in the space of difference, he models ways to facilitate communication across difference. Readers of *One Good Story, That One* are reconstituted into various subject positions through King's manipulations of narrative voice. The polyphonic effect of the structural sequence of the stories within the volume thrusts readers into a surging current from which they emerge at times as listeners, at others, as speakers or distanced silent readers, while still at other times they spin in a whirlpool, tossed through all the perspectives King's writing creates for readers.⁶

This immersion destabilizes not only the normal reading position but also conventional images of Aboriginal people. King's strategic manoeuvring of narrative voice also deploys his sense of humour, described by Margaret Atwood as a "subversive weapon" (244). The satiric wit in the tales of *One Good Story, That One* exposes the absurdity of the self-privileging Western culture so that all readers are left chuckling, and Western, especially Euro-North American ones, might also squirm, a discomfort that is surely necessary if social change is to result.

In his theory and fiction, King opposes the normalization of a dominant Eurocentric perspective and moves to reclaim Native self-definition. Thus, rejecting the term *post-colonial*, King devises alternative terms which pointedly refuse to sanction Eurocentric ideology. King's terms of *tribal*, *interfusional*, *polemical*, and *associational* proposed, delineated, and exemplified in "Godzilla vs. Post-colonial," strive to dissociate Native Literature from Western nationalism and the "cant of progress" (12). While admitting his definitions cannot encompass the full range of Native writing, King proffers them as reference points to signal Aboriginal creative agency. Despite the playful title of King's essay, his admission that these terms are intended merely as "vantage points," and his somewhat self-subverting concession that "it may be that these terms will not do in the end at all" ("Godzilla" 16), the seriousness with which he delineates the categories and proposes them as alternatives for the umbrella term *post-colonial* suggests that he does not intend the entire article to read as an elaborate joke.

Two Curritics Try to Follow Coyote Choreography in *One Good Story, That One*

When applied to *One Good Story, That One*, however, only the category of the interfusional seems really helpful. The stories are clearly not polemical or tribal, and while "Traplines" and "Borders" certainly depict

⁶ We are arguing for an extension to listener-reader-speaker of Susan Berry Brill de Ramirez's term *listener-reader*, which she delineates in *Contemporary American Indian Literatures and the Oral Tradition* (1).

Native characters' everyday lives and their relationships with family and ancestral community, suggesting the ethos of associational literature, their narrative lines are hardly flat, as King suggests those of associational literature most often are. The term *interfusional*, however, identifies with some aptness King's textual recreation of an oral event and his use of the genre conventions and characters of Aboriginal oral traditions. King credits Harry Robinson with producing the most complete form of interfusional literature extant at the time of the essay's publication. In a CBC radio interview with Peter Gzowski, King recounts his awe when first reading the transcribed Robinson stories that anthropologist Wendy Wickwire had sent him when he was compiling an anthology of Native writing: "how well he understood the power of the oral voice in a written piece... it was *inspirational*... but I remember sitting in my office, just sort of sweating, reading this stuff: it was so *good*" (70).

King's account ignores the role of Wickwire in textualizing Robinson's stories, but both it and Chester's more detailed discussion of King's debt make clear that he adopts the Robinson-Wickwire collaboration's techniques of conveying the syntax, idioms, themes, and characters from Native oral tradition in a written form of the English language textured by oral storytelling. The development of an oral syntax compels readers to read out loud. Often the words, especially names, must be spoken in order to be understood, thus recapturing an element of performance that is lost in conventional writing. The inscription of orality in interfusional literature transmits oral tradition still relevant for current circumstances, a relevance that speaks to the dynamism and fluidity of the oral storytelling event. When oral forms are adapted to written codes, neither remains unaltered; they merge in a unique style that enlists the visual to impart characteristics of Native speech.

In *One Good Story, That One*, four stories are clearly interfusional: the title story, "Magpies," "The One About Coyote Going West," and "A Coyote Columbus Story." By interspersing these four amongst stories that follow conventional Western literary narrative structures and idiom, King creates a polyvocal discourse, suggesting that Aboriginal literature does not exist in any one exclusive form, which may be ghettoised or segregated, but that it constitutes a vital part of North American culture.

— *Could be whiteman's ways of telling stories add to Turtle Island culture.*

—*You're right; there is another way to see who's adding to what.*

King's work demonstrates both that Native experience can be expressed by Native authors in Western literary structures and idioms and that standard written language, because of its plasticity, can be indigenized in the service of peripheralized cultures. King's interfusional narratives appropriate the English language and thematically abrogate non-Native superiority, while even his more conventionally literary narratives in

standard English idiom do the latter. A close examination of voice in *One Good Story, That One* illustrates King's commitment to Aboriginal vision that defies reductive binaries by asserting the incommensurable complexity and interrelatedness of life, specifically as manifested in Aboriginal traditions.

In the interfusional title story that opens *One Good Story, That One*, an Aboriginal man recounts a story. He addresses readers directly, "You know" (3), drawing us into his story, eliciting not only our attention but also our participation and responsibility — what Blaeser calls "response-ability" (54)—as participants in a communal activity. "You know" enfolds us, even those of us from outside the ethnic community of the story, into the inside knowing circle, at least for a time. Readers are immediately given the task of situating the story in a relevant time, because we "know." Because oral traditional stories are retold time and again, their location in time is fluid. When King writes, "Old story this one. One hundred years, maybe more. Maybe not so long either, this story" (3), we are given options to locate this event as timeless and/or particular in temporality. The storyteller does not speak in literary sentences but employs a number of markers of oral style.⁷ These elements of the oral syntactically recreate the rhythm and patterns of one form of Native speech, while standard conventions of Western writing make the page accessible for readers, who are comfortable with paragraphing, dialogue, punctuation, and capitalization at the beginning of sentences. In the reading process, however, familiar structures mask unconventional patterns. The ostensible sentences are often incomplete phrases, or single words, and exhibit a variant grammar and an ambiguity that strongly suggests English is not the narrator's first language. Margaret Atwood describes it as "more like a language of last resort" (247). Ironically, while this storyteller addresses readers as listeners, readers become the speakers of this unconventional speech, sounding out loud as the text bids them: Ka-sin-ta (3). The names, together with the truncated lines, repetition, and listing of words, are more accessible, more natural, when spoken. Whereas in print the dulling effect of long lists risks losing the reader's engagement,⁸ in oral narrative, lists embedded in narrative aid memory through rhythm and invite the listener's anticipation of upcoming lines. King ironically

⁷ Many scholars have identified such markers, but Walter J. Ong's chapter "Some Psychodynamics of Orality" in his *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* has been particularly influential. Though his account is useful, he engages in a problematic oppositional binarizing of the oral and the written belied by King's interfusional style. Ruth Finnegan's chapter "Style and Performance" in her *Oral Poetry: Its Nature, Significance and Social Context*, and especially the sub-section 6, "Is There a Special Oral Style?" offers a more nuanced account of the overlapping features of oral and scribal discourses.

⁸ The negative critical response to the kind of honour song that Louise Halfe created for her female forebears in *Blue Marrow* by listing in the context of an Indigenized "Hail Mary" their names (in a fashion somewhat similar to the Bible's "begats" as she once pointed out to me in a conversation) is illustrative of just this point.

synergizes the opposing ramifications of listing when his Native speaker narrates a creation story for the white anthropologists, among whom is a chronicler: “Someone write all this down, I don’t know” (6). After naming eight items in what would sound like a ritual incantation when spoken aloud—“Me-a-loo, call her deer./... /Pe-to-pa-zasling, call her television” (6)—the storyteller admits, “Pretty long list of things to get, that. Too many, maybe those ones say” (6). Listener-reader-speakers begin to experience the complexities of an ostensibly simple itemizing.

—*Maybe learn Coyote dance, those ones.*

After an initial awkwardness, those addressed adjust to their newly acquired speech pattern and become aware of its multileveled meaning, recognizing further aural meanings. The scatological joke of Ju-poo-pea from “One Good Story, That One” and the religious joke of Joe Hovaugh from “A Seat in the Garden” might be lost visually but are unmistakable when spoken. Conversely, the parodic richness of Ah-damn is most likely to be appreciated when read. This interweaving of written and oral/aural belies the strict dichotomy presumed to exist between them. Fee argues that the orality-literacy divide is ideological in nature, devised to legitimate the dominant white culture and relegate the Indigenous orality to an inferior evolutionary status (“Writing Orality” 27). King’s fusion manifests a current, dynamic oral tradition that amalgamates writing into a continuous creative production of tradition. In the interfusional stories of *One Good Story, That One*, King writes the oral not only through syntax and style but thematically as well. The voice of the Native storyteller not only recreates orality, it also represents the vitality of contemporary oral tradition through a revision of history, myth, and culture. King’s textual orality remakes the written from a tool of oppression to one of actualisation. Just as colonial texts encode the fabricated Indian, so too Aboriginal textuality serves as a vehicle for a Native reconstruction of reality.⁹ Jeanette Armstrong describes the Okanagan perception of reality as “like a story: it is easily changeable and transformative with each speaker” (Chester 57). King’s stories denaturalise the colonial perspective, providing “an important opportunity for readers of the dominant culture to look in the mirror of stereotypical caricature” (Wyle 119). Hence the interfusional stories become powerful political activities, affirming Aboriginal readers and dis-arming non-Native readers who might have unwittingly internalised the dominant culture’s bias against Native people.

—*Coyote medicine, then, those stories.*

—*For sure.*

⁹ See Daniel Francis, *The Imaginary Indian: The Image of the Indian in Canadian Culture*.

The opening word of “One Good Story, That One” — “Alright” — signals the technique of the oral storyteller, who must command the attention of the audience’s ears to the narrative event. That this word is also accorded the status of paragraph creates a pause so that the desired audience focussing has time to operate. Readers are drawn into the community of listeners as the teller addresses them directly. Aurality and an invitation to read aloud are immediately implied through the present tense sourcing of the story and the colloquial style: “You know, I hear this story up north” (3). Readers are thus positioned as both the listening “You” and the speaking “I.” The imprecision of time and place — “Maybe Yellowknife...One hundred years, maybe more...Maybe not so long...” (3) — connects past and present, defying the fixity of written records and the Western proclivity to measure time. The “maybes” admit to the limitations of one perspective, and one person’s memory, acknowledging that there are always other possibilities. Moreover, they exemplify the kind of simple repetitions that Paul Goetsch identifies as elements found more often in oral than in written language (74).

The sense of participating in an Aboriginal oral-storytelling event is confirmed by a number of features in the second paragraph. The refocusing “So” is soon followed by another “You” that re-confirms the interaction between storyteller and audience. Also in this paragraph, King establishes what will become a characteristic feature of the interfusional stories, the rhythm of the reduplication, or doubling, of the subject — “that one,” “this one,” “those ones” — that serves to clarify and focus the subject in a number of Aboriginal languages. The Native spirit of relationship between humanity and nature crystallizes through the ambiguity of phrasing and anthropomorphising of the river. “These ones, they come with Napiao, my friend. Cool. On the river. Indians call him Ka-sin-ta, that river...” (3). That the narrator refers to the river as “him” means that the attributes of the friend Napiao and the river “also call Napo” (3) converge, suggesting that both share a friendship with the storyteller.¹⁰ Similarly, both the wind and the river display agency and connection with the speaker and his world. The wind says hello, and the river “moves things around.” For the speaker, the name of the river reflects an understanding that springs from relationship. The river’s name, in effect, makes sense. The “Whiteman” has no relationship with the river, yet he imposes an arbitrary label on it that is devoid of meaning for the Native person. The “misspelling” “Saint Merry,” aside from signalling a Native sense of humour — one that originates with the author who knows the grapholect, the standard written version of the language, rather than with the oral story-teller — underlines the imposition of a foreign religion that ignores an established spirituality and indicates an assumed right to the land.

¹⁰ The Blackfoot Creator is called Old Man, and the Old Man River in southern Alberta is one mark of his life-giving presence among the people.

For those who know that the Blackfoot name for the river translates as Old Man, the alternate namings act as synecdoche of territorial disputes in which oral traditional stories are arrayed against written documents of Crown title. Since Napo is the Creator in Blackfoot cosmogony, the name connects to sacred story cycles, which in turn establish what J. Edward Chamberlin would have Canadians recognize as underlying Blackfoot title. The question “If this is your land, where are your stories?” asked by a Gitksan elder of government foresters claiming traditional Gitksan lands for logging (Chamberlin 1), rests on the idea that a people long resident in one territory will have a storied relationship with their land. Seen in this light, King’s apparently innocent reporting of different namings, then, is anything but; the Blackfoot naming constitutes the basis of a territorial claim and the Whiteman’s naming shows up as later superimposition, importing a name from different territory to apply to a sacred feature of Blackfoot terrain.

Moreover, “The Whiteman,” singular, referred to in this context denotes a homogenized collective. In a complete inversion of the Eurocentric reification of Indigenous Nations as Indian, in this narrative the non-Natives are reduced to the alien status of other: “Whiteman, those.” The narrative voice that pulled even White readers inside the privileged circle now positions such readers as part of the generalized Whiteman, and in an oral formulaic listing clarifies the Whiteman’s identity by opposing it to that of subordinated groups:

No Indianman
 No Chinaman
 No Frenchman
 Too bad, those. (3)

Oral speech employs repetition and additions for emphasis and as a mnemonic device; however, this oral form on the page creates a humorous visual effect as well. Seeing the repeated “No” beside the cultural designation in the singular, suggest the erasure of these groups—there is, for example, no Indianman. The ambiguity of the final line might be lost aurally, simply heard as an aside. Visually, the closure of the list opens a realm of meaning which we are required to interpret. Are we sorry for the groups enumerated or for the Whiteman? Does the phrase signify an excess degree of badness? Whose? Whose side are we as reader-listener-speakers on? The story leaves such questions open.

Digressions and interjections combine with the elements of oral speaking mentioned above to consistently sustain an experience of orality that involves all readers in a dynamic episode of Aboriginal reality. Even though non-Native readers may not fully grasp the inside jokes, they can feel (gratefully) included in the communal sharing of food, drink, and knowledge. They can imaginatively associate with the community that indulgently tolerates the naive anthropologists. By his strategic writing of

the oral narrative voice, King brilliantly rearranges the colonial perspective on the “dumb Indian.”

The anthropologists whose work has played a significant role in the reification and devaluation of the non-European Other appear puerile, absurd in what they would see as their well-intentioned visit. These professionals, whom we know purport to record tradition in order to preserve it, come a long way “from past Ta-pe-loo-za,” also called “Blind Man Coulee” (4). Napiao’s words situate the anthropologists in past darkness. They simply don’t get it. Their place of origin, when spoken out loud as Tape-loser, suggests they have lost their tapes! This multi-levelled loss is supported visually when we see the paragraph begins with “These are good men” and ends with “maybe fish” (4). Readers’ own multiple subject position enriches both the irony and hilarity of the situation since all experience this storytelling in the present while the anthropologists miss the joke completely. They are being fished around in and completely take the joker’s bait, swallowing whole the idea of an Indian Adam and Eve myth. Perceived as “Pretty loud talkers” (4), they do not come to listen or learn but to appropriate a history that serves romantic nationalism. While losing tapes here seems analogous to losing marbles, the reliance of the anthropologists on taping provides greater dimensions to this joke. Therefore the storyteller obliges with a tale for their recorder mindset.

The imprecise time of the storyteller’s narrative shifts to a similarly inexact but recognizably Western (and originally oral) formula, “once upon a time,” which most now associate with written fairytales. Oral and written traditions are thus juxtaposed through evoking their different conceptions of time — “Those stories... start on time” (5) — even while the line between the oral and the written is in fact blurred. From here King leads us through a dizzying whirl of ontologies. The storyteller grants the Whiteman’s request by returning the anthropologists’ own creation story, reconstituted through Native consciousness, much like the anthropological handling of Indigenous belief. The biblical Genesis narrative is visited (repeatedly) by Coyote who “fool around [...] Tricky one, that Coyote. Walks in circles. Sneaky”(8). The sanctity of the written word in Western culture is lampooned. The moronic Whiteman Ah-damn is kept busy writing things down, names that Coyote makes up: “Beaver come by, says Khan-yah-da” (8). Most non-Native readers encountering Ah-damn’s list will likely feel uncertain if any of the ostensibly Native words have meaning or not.¹¹ After hearing the joke of the beaver name, Canada, such readers may well wonder if many speakers of Native languages would not have even greater cause for amusement at such readers’ expense. Yet as readers and consequent speakers of the narrative voice, non-Native readers

¹¹ In an interview with Peter Gzowski, when talk of *Green Grass, Running Water* turned to its linguistic variety, King admitted to his language practice in his stories, “I’ve got a couple of stories where I simply made it [the “Native” language] up” (72).

implicate themselves together with Ah-damn, damning themselves, yet somehow unable to feel aggrieved because of the hilarity of the situation.

The extent to which King is blurring oral and written traditions, the usually assumed chronology of the oral “developing” into the written, and the collocated binary of the underdeveloped oral people and the highly developed literary culture is evident in King’s play with the creation story the ostensibly oral storyteller (who is really a literary creation) tells. The hero of this Genesis narrative is neither stupid Ah-damn nor nasty god; the hero is rather the smart, resourceful Evening: “she be Indian woman, I guess” (8). This “first woman” (9) is a far cry from her counterpart Eve. Whereas “Eve” connotes being on the edge, or waiting for something, as in Christmas Eve, “Evening” implies balancing, levelling out. Based on many Native creation myths, this Indigenous first woman is making things even, fair, just.¹² In an about-turn from the Western association of Eve with the evil serpent, Evening “stick a mee-so in [the serpent’s] mouth” (9). She not only leaves Ju-poo-pea with god, but fixes Ah-damn up after his literal fall. This version of Genesis rejects male stewardship and female subordination as well as guilt, evil, and god. It asserts, instead, a Native respect for women, the environment, and Coyote. Such traditional Native values framed within foundational Western myths deployed parodically through a textualized oral voice destabilize generational sedimentations of colonial attitudes. The resulting erosion of constructed order exemplifies the spirit of the trickster Coyote. Hence, the concluding line of the story leaves us, the speakers of the “I,” to “clean up all the Coyote tracks on the floor” (10), after which we return to our original identity, never quite the same after this first dance with Coyote.¹³

In the second interfusional story, “Magpies,” the narrative voice is that of an older Aboriginal man. Although this storyteller speaks in a more standard English than the narrator of “One Good Story, That One,” using complete sentences more frequently, he manifests many similar markers of orality. This narrator speaks out of a community where different worldviews co-exist with varying levels of unease. His story has a life of its own: “Here comes that story again” (21). Since “Everyone knows this story” (21), it is possible to argue that all are once more admitted into the circle, attentive, in order to respond when addressed. Alternatively, one might argue that a reader who has not before encountered this story will recognize that it is, at least in the first instance, directed to those in the speaker’s immediate community. The teller encourages engagement mid-story, however, with the invitation “Let’s see what happens” (27). Through involvement in the circle where humans, nature, and objects

¹² See Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions*.

¹³ The open-ended quality of the story is illustrated by Margaret Atwood’s interpretation of Coyote as embodied in the anthropologists. While this notion adheres to the perspective shifting that King so ably facilitates, we prefer to see Coyote in the narrator.

interrelate, all addressees are assigned the task of interpreting the contradictions they both see and hear. They must resolve the puzzle of the magpies for themselves. "Magpies" conveys the ubiquitous ambiguity of Coyote who "embodies paradox" (Chester, 56) and whose spirit permeates Aboriginal consciousness and expression. Thus, it follows that King's interfusional narratives are essentially Coyote tales, all of which are articulated from and assert an Aboriginal worldview. The possibility and imprecision that appear in the "maybe" of oral language; the multileveled meaning of words or puns; the blurred boundaries between categories of difference, such as gender; the imbrication of fantasy and fact; hospitality and inter-connectedness together with an acute sense of irony all resonate with Coyote energy. The conclusion of "Magpies" positions readers for creative participation with the story. The narrator at once offers and withholds the information:

But I know what happened.
But I can't tell.
I promised.
You can count on me. (30)

Visually the lines suggest poetry, complex and ambiguous. Evidently "we," the addressed, can trust the voice to withhold desired knowledge. Hence the visual and oral Coyote voice places us ironically in the "I" position as we articulate the "I," letting it sound on our ears even during a silent reading, bidding us establish the content of knowing.

In the final two interfusional stories, readers are positioned to converse directly with Coyote. In introducing *All My Relations*, King describes the trickster as "an important figure for Native writers for it allows us to create a particular kind of world in which the Judeo-Christian concern with good and evil, order and disorder is replaced with the more Native concern for balance and harmony" (xiii). Although Coyote has no ultimate answers and makes mistakes, she is nevertheless welcomed into the human community. In "The One About Coyote Going West," the oral storyteller recounts a creation story to correct the fallacious notions Coyote has acquired from reading books. The promise of a good story invites hospitality: "Maybe some moose-meat stew come along, listen to your story" (68). King's humour targets written culture's claims of authenticity or accuracy. Coyote's reading results in an outpouring of comic inaccuracies that the storyteller dismisses not as untrue but as familiar "Whiteman stories." Engaged in the oral rhythm, once again readers assume the role of storyteller, this time challenging the history books. Coyote addresses the storyteller as grandmother at one time and grandfather at another, signalling the respect accorded to an elder regardless of gender. In addition to undermining the Western male/female dichotomy, the inclusive gendering mimics the un-gendered pronouns of many Native languages. The oscillation between grandmother and grandfather also represents the Native sense of community grounded in

responsibility to the basic family unit. The Native family imperative extends to the cosmic order and, as King explains in his introduction to *All My Relations*, inappropriate behaviour is admonished by “say[ing] of someone that they act as if they have no relations” (ix). In “A Coyote Columbus Story” Coyote is puzzled at the rudeness of her Columbus people: “They act as if they have no relations” (124). Temporarily accepting the titles of grandmother and grandfather, listener-reader-speakers are swept into the symbolic community and the weight of responsibility that membership entails.

In this story’s revised account of history, Coyote’s first creation is a big mistake which she encounters, significantly, out West. The mistake is filling the world with things imagined from a “Big book” (75), a department store catalogue. Indians result from the reluctant transmogrification of ducks. Indians are created in order to function as consumers of the excessive “stuff” generated from the catalogue. Here is, once again, a retelling of a Western foundational narrative in a foreign framework that is not interested in Western epistemology. Perhaps akin to the way White culture decontextualized and distorted Indigenous ritual practice, the Native storyteller plays with the biblical notion of “In the beginning was the Word” and “the Word was made flesh” (Jn. 1:1). In “The One about Coyote Going West” incarnations or, rather, materializations from a text cause much grief to the world. History in this tale is retold to get it at once right and written. This circular movement is reinforced through the recurrence of the number four. Four as a symbol of season and life stages moves in an enduring circularity. The narrative voice also conveys a circular movement, from narrator to reader to Coyote and back. The narrative voice of the storyteller in interfusional stories connects the non-Native with Native perspectives in an unprecedented way. Ultimately, this narrative voice places all in multiple subject positions, offering radically altered views.

The conventional structure of “Totem,” with its omniscient narrative voice, is strategically placed between two interfusional narratives, thus preventing the reader from associating Native issues purely with oral modes of storytelling. Just as the totem in the museum can not be removed or silenced, so Native issues can not be ghettoized into one form of expression. The standard voice and conventional Western form of the story illustrate and reinforce its theme. The persistence of Aboriginal voice, language, and spirituality are manifested in the sounds of the totem, alternatively heard as gargling (13), chuckling (14), laughing, chanting, grunting (16), shouting, and singing (17). The sounds and material presence of the totem are deemed a disruptive intrusion on the Atlantic Canada “Seaviews” exhibit at the museum, and the totem’s being chain-sawed down and carted off to the “basement near the boiler” (15) function as symbolic re-enactment of the violent uprooting of Aboriginal peoples from their long-established places, their relegation to reserves, and the suppression of their spiritual practices, voices, and languages. But the

totem continues to reassert its presence and make what museum workers hear as its noise. Given how often languages other than speakers' mother-tongue are heard as babble (Chamberlin 8) or, more broadly, noise, and given that totems can be understood as not just visual art related to spiritual beliefs but part of the discursive institutions of some Native oral economies (Wilmott), King's point in the story is decidedly political. Thus the re-emergence of a totem pole in the corner of the gallery, where it is perceived as grunting, shouting, and finally singing, comically thematizes the continuing vitality of Aboriginal oral, artistic, and spiritual traditions in the face of hostile reception and commodification in capitalist culture.

—*Maybe need to learn Indian language, those museum people.*

—*Basil Johnston, who worked at the Royal Ontario Museum for years, has certainly made the point that to know a people in any depth and breadth, you have to learn their language.*

The three stories in which King uses an omniscient narrator all emphasize White incomprehension of Aboriginal reality as well as a stubborn adherence to stereotypes. The futility of the museum's efforts to clear out the Native exhibit is echoed in "How Colonel Colin Sterling Saved Blossom, Alberta, and Most of the Rest of the World as Well" by the Mountie corporal's inability to hang onto what he refers to as "our Indians" (59). Just as the totem's noise in the earlier story reverberates from the basement despite the measures taken to silence it, this story suggests that the reification of the "Indian" will not extinguish Aboriginal life. Mainstream culture has constructed the wooden Indian, and invested in its maintenance for pleasure, profit, and convenience. In an updated version that moves the reification one step further, petrified "Indians" are used as decorative artefacts in the living room of the Bempos'—those folks with the name that seems so odd until readers make the connection with Fenimore Cooper's Natty Bumppo of the Leather-Stocking Tales—and others are inventoried and "protectively" warehoused for easy access when profitable for White culture. The rigid Native bodies are alive and waiting for Coyote to take them away, however, and, one, despite its petrification, is, in Corporal Sterling's successive judgements, mumbling (51), singing, and chanting (53). The dense, but lovable, "Dudley Doright-esque" Corporal Sterling neither recognizes Coyote's summoning cry nor comprehends that Coyote cannot be stopped. Dr. Phelps may understand that the Natives' paralysis presages "a flight into space" (60), but readers are positioned to understand that Coyote, in a kind of science-fiction shape-shifting into blue, alien coyotes, is liberating "Indians" all round the world—including the nearly fifty who have ended up vacationing in Germany (62-63), where people actually play "Indian" on weekends and summer holidays. Yet, the non-Natives in the story will not or cannot see beyond the imaginary Indian, and cast themselves as protectors and rescuers.

Omniscient narration gives an impression of authority so that the reader is able to observe all characters and listen to their discourse without the bias of one character's perspective. Of course this is simply an impression since the author manipulates point of view through choice of narrative voices. The narrative voice in this story provides a panoramic viewpoint that exposes the absurdity of Native stereotypes. Non-Natives are caricatured as pathetically obtuse, while the Aboriginal characters, in contrast, are patient, tolerant, intelligent. Despite the marked distinction between reified Indian and Hollywood Mountie, both cultural constructs, we are presented with different voices of "whites" as well. Ralph immediately identifies coyotes rather than the "damn Indians" his wife hears, and Dr. Phelps appears to understand the event to some extent: "They're probably up there somewhere laughing at us right now" (62). King's use of embodiments of Old Coyote in this framework exemplifies the goal of the three stories told by the omniscient narrator: to show that Native tradition is a vital, flourishing presence in North America despite non-Native resolve to contain it. It may even appear in science fiction or in any literary genre, in any language.

Though written in a Euro-Canadian voice, the seventh story, "The Seat in the Garden," depends on the mind's ear remaining alert. The narrator describes an incident in the life of a regular Joe, whose surname, Hovaugh, together with his first, illustrates his opinion of himself: speaking Joe's full name aloud, those familiar with the Judaeo-Christian tradition hear *Jehovah*. The story opens with Joe in his garden, its weeds signifying its post-lapsarian state. Joe's Eden is plagued by a classic Hollywood image of an Indian who, in case readers do not recognize the description as cliché, repeats the famous lines from the film *Field of Dreams*, "If you build it... they will come" (83-84). Joe is a vintage bigot. He is self-righteously determined to be rid of this Indian blight, soon shown to be a figment of his imagination, yet the narrator simply narrates the dialogue and action without comment or judgement. Readers are free to make their own evaluations of Joe, who labels three men doing environmental clean-up in his neighbourhood as winos and Lysol drinkers simply because they are Native.

The standard framework and narration of "The Seat in the Garden" radically undercut stereotypes of Aboriginal people by presenting the unconventional conventionally. Joe is juxtaposed with the ironically named Red, who is enchanted with the romantic big screen image of the Native. And the beer-swilling, can-throwing Jehovah is also seen with the Trinity of elderly Indigenous men who are too kind to laugh in Joe's face. For both Joe and Red, the spectre of the Indian is more real than the actual people. From the distance this narrative voice affords, non-Native readers are permitted to distinguish themselves from the misguided non-Natives in the story and positioned to think twice the next time they confront a screen representation of an "Indian."

Using first-person narration, the remaining stories—“Trap Lines,” “Joe the Painter and the Deer Island Massacre,” and “Borders”—contribute to King’s affirmation of a range of Aboriginal identities. The narrative voice of “Trap Lines” belongs to a forty-six-year-old Aboriginal man who was always, by his own admission, “shy around language” (33). He conveys his struggle to relate to his eighteen-year-old son by recounting past and present conversations with his own father and with his son. The failure of expression is symbolized by constipation. Spoken in the first person, the narrator strikes cross-cultural emotional chords through his vulnerability and poignant sincerity, and Native issues of employment, housing, and education are introduced without being highlighted. The narrative voice connects readers and characters on an emotional level, while recognition of shared humanity works towards dissolving prejudice.

In “Joe the Painter,” the first-person narrative of a Native town-dweller and only friend of the non-Native title character, Joe Ghoti, heightens our sense of the absurdity of Joe’s project of making Native people look more Native in a play he wants the town to stage. As Atwood observes: “this wonderfully satiric but deadpan story could be seen as a kind of parody-in-miniature... of the Lone Ranger and Tonto... It would not work nearly as well as ambush if our minds had not already been lulled into somnolence by a great deal of storytelling in which things were seen far otherwise” (247). From the narrator’s perspective, readers learn to appreciate the forthrightness that is the source of Joe’s lack of popularity because Joe is the only non-Native to admit the truth about the history of their town.

The final story, “Borders,” is no less an ambush than any of the former narratives. It begins almost exactly as “Trap Lines”: “When I was twelve, maybe thirteen [...]” (131). The innocuous repetition signals Coyote’s presence, obscuring certainty, promising surprise. Readers begin to suspect the unexpected. What begins as childhood reminiscence ends as a tale of the narrator’s mother as a political activist, challenging the imposition of borders that erase First Nations, here specifically Blackfoot, identity. The quotidian realities of food and conversation lull non-Aboriginal readers into association with an event that is ultimately groundbreaking. The perspective of the young boy who is more concerned with food than civil disobedience heightens our awe at the courage and determination of his mother, creating or renewing the realization that barriers to First Nations personhood must be challenged in the daily course of life. The story’s conventional voice and structure augment the politically charged themes non-Native readers can associate with through narrative voice.

King weaves an intricate web of spoken and written codes within his stories and within the strategic ordering of the collection. By juxtaposing stories narrated in ways designed to evoke Aboriginal storytelling with stories of more conventionally literary idiom, King erodes the binary

exclusivity constructed between speaking and writing and between Western and Native cultures. For non-Natives, the unique quality of the oral story compels consideration while the familiarity of the written code means the narrative has the potential to shock such readers out of their complacency by the representation of unfamiliar events. The literary structures that helped spawn the oppressive stereotypical images of the “Indian” now under new management provide the arena for both dismantling the old and re-presenting the current expression of Native writers in a way that may well give Native readers the pleasure of seeing their world presented in a way that accords with their experiences.

Readers of King’s stories engage in a dance with Coyote as one who eschews constructed borders, so they are transported into cultural spaces with an efficiency that may have the capacity to effect permanent transformation. Long after the book has been shelved, its notions germinate fresh crops of meaning. In “The Cartography of Bodies,” Radhika Mohanran identifies Merleau-Ponty’s notion of dance as a constant recreation of body in space: “The body mediates with the world and actively participates in it... [Having learned to dance] the body constantly re-enacts the originary spontaneity; the habit of dance recomposes the body, which rearranges itself anew in this situation and reveals its constant renewal only in motility” (18). *One Good Story, That One* keeps readers moving, figuratively rearranging our bodies and our consciousnesses. As readers we experience King’s thematizing of oral tradition in both interfusional and the more traditionally literary stories, but his literary recreation of oral style as his “oral” narrator summons our attention; addresses us directly; uses fragmentary syntax, repetitions, colloquialisms, present historical tense, and Native namings; choreographs our movement into the listener-reader-speaker mode. Thus as we move through the pages of the text with our Coyote partner, we negotiate through shifting perspectives, even shape-shifting into the space of Coyote. King orchestrates this dance, directing our course, insisting we “do it right” (122). Ultimately we realize that King too plays the Coyote: getting it right is an eternal process, a cyclical dance of listening, laughing, learning, and creating.

—*Doggone good medicine, those stories.*

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