

# Coyote Pedagogy

## Knowing Where the Borders Are in Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water*

The most striking effect of *Green Grass, Running Water* is its ability to arouse readers' desire to "get" the in-jokes, to track the allusions, and to find answers to a whole series of posed but unanswered questions. An unidentified speaker begins the story in an unknown location—an allusion to Northrop's Frye's comment that the Canadian sensibility "is less perplexed by the question 'Who am I?' than by some such riddle as 'Where is here?'" (220). We are across a border, but which one? And then we hit the Cherokee syllabics: this is Cherokee territory, but even when we translate the words, when we know the colours and the directions, we still don't know what they mean to the culture that uses them. There is no reader of this novel, except perhaps Thomas King, who is not outside some of its networks of cultural knowledge. But every reader is also inside at least one network and can therefore work by analogy to cross borders into the others. We want to put as much emphasis on the "knowing" in our title as on the "borders": borders are constructed by what you know and don't know. Coyote pedagogy requires training in illegal border-crossing.

Here are some examples of how this works. If, for example, you put together the word play of Louis, Ray and Al, the fishing buddies from Manitoba who plan "to hang around Scott Lake" (335) and come up with Métis leader Louis Riel (1844-1885) and the hanging of Thomas Scott, then you will probably suspect that Sally Jo Weyha (182) can also be tracked, however deviously, back to "real" life, to Sacajawea (1784-1884? or 1812?), the Shoshone who was the sole woman and guide on the Lewis and Clark Expedition (1803-1806).

If you get Clifford Sifton, then you might suspect that King has drawn Bill Bursum (80) from “real” life. Sifton (1861-1929) was an aggressive promoter of white settlement (and Native displacement) through the Prairie West Movement. He was also Federal Minister of the Interior and Superintendent of Indian Affairs in Wilfrid Laurier’s government (1896-1905). That the historical Sifton was quite deaf is apt—many characters in this novel don’t listen when they should. Bill Bursum? He is Sifton, American Style. The historical Bursum was Holm O. Bursum (1867-1953), a senator from New Mexico, who advocated the development of New Mexico’s mineral resources. He proposed the infamous Bursum Bill of 1921, which aimed to give Pueblo land and water rights to non-Indians (Sturtevant). And Buffalo Bill (43) is an appropriate nickname for the proprietor of the Home Entertainment Barn, as the Wild West Shows of the original Buffalo Bill, William F. Cody (1846-1917), provided subject matter for many a male fantasy in dime novel or movie.

King’s strategy for writing for an audience primarily composed of the uninformed is not to pander to its preconceptions or to produce explanations, but to entice, even trick this audience into finding out for themselves. The reward for following King’s merry chase is the pure pleasure of getting the point or the joke, the pleasure of moving across the border separating insider and outsider. Borders make us stupid and allow us to remain so if we let them. Lionel, told that “Massasoit was the Indian who greeted the Europeans at Plymouth Rock” responds “I’m Canadian” (58). This is not so much an explanation of his ignorance as a defence of it. Remember, Lionel wants to be white even if to do this requires paying no attention at all to what is going on around him and falling asleep during his Aunt Norma’s frequent instruction sessions. King similarly bombards us with allusions to what is basic general knowledge for at least three distinct groups: Canadians, Americans, and Native North Americans. Anyone who wants to understand (or teach) the novel has to be prepared to cross the political border between the two countries, the disciplinary borders between English literature, Native Studies, and Anthropology, the literary border between Canadian and American literature. The most important border is between white ignorance and red knowledge: for King this is not a border that Euro-North Americans can cross without passing an IQ test. And this means, as the narrator says to Coyote “pay attention . . . or we’ll have to do this again” (104) and “forget being helpful and listen” (229).

Borders mark the edge of the expected, the edge of the known. When Babo, who is keenly perceptive and catches every nuance of what people say to her, goes into the Canadian border post, she notices “a large picture of a woman in a formal with a tiara” (236) hanging on the wall behind the counter. Canadian readers will be particularly amused that “the Queen,” Elizabeth II, can be reduced to “a woman,” an unknown. This is, by analogy, how whites “see” Native culture: as totally decontextualized. Babo can’t know what she is seeing if it is completely foreign to her, but years of oppression have taught her to try. And this is how the reader must learn to operate: to pay attention, especially in foreign territory.

*Green Grass, Running Water* is full of jokes that require detailed cultural/historical knowledge for full appreciation. The biggest joke is the climax of the novel, the bursting of the dam that kills Eli Stands Alone. The climax is tragic because a good man dies for his people and at the same time a huge groaner of a pun that is the punch line for a ridiculous shaggy dog (read shaggy coyote) story. Five hundred years after Columbus, three cars, a red Pinto (23), a blue Nissan (175) and a white Karmann-Ghia (235)—the Nina, the Pinta and the Santa Maria—crash into the already stress-fractured Grand Baleen Dam and break it during an earthquake caused by Coyote’s dancing. In a sense then, this novel climaxes, flushes or overflows in an outburst of scatological humour (see Lowe 195), as three used cars, the symbolic shit of twentieth-century technology, overflow the toilet. To get the shaggy dog story one has to have some specific cultural knowledge about Christopher Columbus, his ships, and the flat-earth view commonly (but wrongly) attributed to early explorers. One also has to have been listening, since a shaggy dog story works on sound play, on puns. This is an oral story, don’t forget.

To get the point about the timing of the dam break, one also needs some understanding of the Sun Dance. The dam bursts at sunrise (412) on a Sun Dance day; it is the morning after Eli has joined in the dancing (388). To get this point, we only have to “pay attention” to the details of the text itself. Even without insider knowledge, we can understand what Eli’s dancing signifies, why Eli takes Lionel there to celebrate his birthday, and why Lionel’s getting his face painted is not a trivial or childish birthday treat (Powell 811-29). If as non-Natives we get this, we cross the border into an area of knowledge about Native spirituality.

To get more of the point about the dam’s giving way, Parliament Lake’s disappearing because of stress (136) and the refusal of Eli Stands Alone to

move his mother's cabin, one needs knowledge about Elijah Harper, the Meech Lake Accord, the Charlottetown Conference, and the Canadian constitutional debate, as well as knowledge about dam projects affecting North American Natives, for example the James Bay Project, specifically the Great Whale/Grand Baleine Dam and the Cree in Quebec, the Oldman Dam and the Blackfoot in Alberta; and the Kinzua Dam and the Seneca in Pennsylvania (see Waldram, Wallace 5, and Deloria, *Custer* 36). King asks us to bring together different "sets" of information to emphasize the similarities between the struggle over land and water rights on both sides of the border. The promises made in early treaties were to last as long as the sun shines, the waters run and the grasses grow (208, 271, and so on.)

Thus the different views of the dam. Cliff, for example, sees the dam as "a beauty," to which Eli responds "Reminds me of a toilet" (136). King shows what the dam means for both Native economics and Native spirituality. Fishing in Parliament Lake is "probably very good" according to Latisha (336), but there is a court order prohibiting fishing. The dam, in fact, "is killing the river" and if there are no floods, the cottonwoods will not get the nutrients they need; thus, Harley asks "And if the cottonwoods die, where are we going to get the Sun Dance tree?" (376). Just as Native Americans saw their lands disappearing under the rising waters of dam projects, so Bill Bursum is transfixed as his high-priced shoreline disappears after the dam bursts and "the water roll[s] on as it had for eternity" (415). Norma starts to rebuild her mother's cabin where they "can see the sun in the morning" (424). Treaty rights are asserted again; those who think of dams only in terms of economic progress are left, like Bursum, standing on shaky ground.

In order to really "get" the whole joke, one has to learn not only the facts, but also come to terms with a sense of humour that can only be described as subversive, which may explain what the Canadian Security and Intelligence Service is doing in the novel. Consider, for example, the ways in which King fools around with the Bible, literary canons, and taken-for-granted social, political and sexual norms.

King introduces Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* appropriately enough in the section beginning "This according to Ishmael" (104) with several references, including "I read the book. It's Moby-Dick, the great white whale who destroys the *Pequod*" (196). Changing Woman finds herself on the *Pequod* with Ahab and his men. No white whale appears but the cry goes

up: "Whaleswhaleswhaleswhalesbianswhalesbianswhaleswhales!" (195), and a frenzy of killing ensues. Changing Woman, appalled at the killing, is told "This is a Christian world, you know. We only kill things that are useful or things we don't like" (196), which covers just about everything. Ahab's men keep looking for the white whale and another cry goes up, "Blackwhaleblackwhalesblackwhalesbianblackwhalebianblackwhale" and Ahab responds "You mean white whale, don't you? Moby-Dick the great male white whale?" (196). Our attention now turns to black instead of white. As in the first cry, King "buries" *lesbian* in the words. Then he uses Ahab to draw particular attention to the maleness of Moby-Dick. What have we got here? An attack on lesbians and the refusal to recognize blackness (and oh, how students of Melville have had to consider the ambiguity of the *whiteness* of the whale!). Though his crew tells him the whale is black and female, Ahab persists in seeing a great white male whale. He also throws overboard anyone willing to see her for what she is (black, female, lesbian). Changing Woman, of course, not only sees her quite clearly, but she thinks she is "a very beautiful whale" (197). She is told to grab a harpoon and make herself useful (if she won't act like a man—Queequeg, the harpooner—then she is, as a woman who might well be slotted into the category black and who seems quite uninterested in sex with men, in danger herself). She instead jumps overboard and joins Moby Jane for a semi-erotic ride (224). The great male adventure story turns into a female friendship story. This inability to see blacks, females, lesbians as people explains why no one has noticed that the four old Indians are women; because they act like men, they have been mapped on to male mixed-race pairs of Western literature that operate on the hierarchical model of the Lone Ranger, whose name in Spanish, *Kemo Sabe*, means "He who knows" and Tonto, whose name means "Numbskull."

To put this all together we have to juxtapose knowledge from different sources. Moby-Dick/Moby-Jane points explicitly to Melville and establishes how gender differences are marked in names (except for Babo!). Most readers will still get the "Look, look, see Dick and Jane" allusion to the perfect white family of the Ginn readers. Dick and Jane also establish the difference between a Moby with a dick and a Moby without one (or any interest in one) and so we can make the jump to lesbian, too. White versus black takes us into a society based on oppressive binaries, hard categories and rigid borders. Even Coyote has trouble seeing Moby-Jane because he has "read the book" (196).

And in this episode too, King the history teacher adds the Native twist. His play on Pequod and Pequots reminds Coyote that he may have been reading part of the Western canon, but he ought to have been reading Native history: *Moby-Dick* covers over a white society that killed its foes, sold all the survivors into slavery, and abolished the use of any Pequot names, effectively wiping out any record of them. There are no “others” left to recognize. Thus the process by which the Western canon (not to mention American school readers) has obliterated possibility and difference is laid bare.

The scene between A.A. Gabriel and Thought Woman is too complex to unpack completely here, but the Virgin Birth is the centre for the novel’s other main trick: Alberta’s pregnancy. This Annunciation scene uses the common misreading of the “immaculate conception” as the conception of Jesus in Mary (rather than Mary’s own sinless conception). When Thought Woman says no, Coyote says “So she really means yes, right?”—we are back in the world of compulsory heterosexuality, where every woman is assumed to want sex and a man, whatever she says. Coyote does think about it, clearly, and right after Thought Woman floats away, he starts to dance, the wind rises and the rain falls, a downpour that soaks Alberta “right through to her underwear” (353). In the Cherokee story, Star Woman is made pregnant by the wind (Ywahoo 31). Coyote, apparently, is responsible for impregnating both Alberta and Mary: “But I was helpful too . . . That woman who wanted a baby. Now that was helpful” (416). Note that earlier the narrator has explained bestiality to Coyote, but Coyote says “But he doesn’t mean coyotes” (146). Rules are made for coyotes to break! Apart from ignoring borders between animal and human (or divine and human, if you prefer), this subversive move makes the central story of the Christian religion into a Coyote story, and repeats the novel’s overall strategy which subsumes European culture and history into an Aboriginal framework, and counters a patriarchal religion with a matriarchal one.

And here it’s worth making another point: you can never assume that you have got the complete joke: there is always more. For example, Thought Woman floats around thinking about good points and bad points to her situation and we all think of those jokes that begin, well, there’s a good side to this and a bad side, which would you like to hear first. But as she floats around, she thinks “Under the good points . . . there are no coyotes” (323). Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* does this. So does God in a story called “Coyote Challenges God” told by Harry Robinson in *Write it on Your Heart*; God tells Coyote,

you've done a lot of good things  
 and you've done a lot of bad things  
 And it seems to be the bad you've done,  
 it's more than the good.  
 So that's why I'm going to put you in one place.  
 And you going to stay there until the end of the world.  
 (122)

This explains why Old Coyote turns up only in the Native stories—although the narrator says that Coyote can't be contained so easily: "this world is full of Coyotes" (272).

Similarly, the Louis, Ray and Al who hang around Scott Lane also may allude to Canadian modernist poets Louis Dudek, Ray Souster, Al Purdy, and F.R. Scott. And remember when Babo notices that the American flagpole tilts to the right and the Canadian flagpole to the left at the border crossing? (see also King "Borders"). This may refer to the dominant politics of each country, but it may also refer to the Sun Dance pole, which must stand absolutely straight in the ceremony (Welch 49). So it's not good enough to pay attention, you have to keep on paying attention. Significantly, Sitting Bull's vision at the last great Sun Dance before Little Big Horn included a voice saying "I give you these [U.S. soldiers] because they have no ears" (Welch 51).

The move from eschatology to scatology is part of Native subversive humour (Lowe 195). Norma turns Latisha's restaurant into a successful tourist trap by taking a racist epithet used against Indians ("dog-eater") and turning it on tourists, who are happy to pay to eat pretend doggy-doo and Black Labrador stew. Lionel, typically, doesn't get Norma's joke, "The Blackfoot didn't eat dog" (57). And it is a pretty complex one. Native Americans turn the sad reality of near-starvation for the Sioux around the time of Little Bighorn, when they had to eat dogs after the buffalo disappeared, into a joke. Vine Deloria Jr. says that "other tribes . . . announce that their chef has prepared a special treat for the Sioux guests at the annual banquet through the special cooperation of the local dog pound" (*Custer* 165). But this joke crosses the border (as did the Sioux/Lakota with Sitting Bull after the Battle of Little Bighorn); it also alludes to the White Dog Ceremony—part of a revival of old traditions among the Six Nations at the end of the eighteenth century, now referred to as the Longhouse religion, and practiced on both sides of the Canada-U.S. border (see Hoxie). And of course, the café name alludes to Vine Deloria's book *God is Red*, which pro-

poses that religion should derive ecologically from particular territories, and concludes that as Native people “discover the meaning of the lands of their ancestors, the invaders of the North American continent will finally discover that for this land, God is Red” (301). But if you don’t get the Native jokes, there are some white jokes here too, for example the pun, signaled by the God/Dog jokes on the opening pages, on Nietzsche’s famous aphorism, God is Dead, since this is the Dead Dog, or rather Dead God Café.

This is Native pedagogy. We are not only being taught Native history, but we are also being taught it in the Native way—we are not just acquiring information, but learning how to process it differently. As Lee Maracle explains it

Most of our stories don’t have orthodox ‘conclusions’; that is left to the listeners, who we trust will draw useful lessons from the story—not necessarily the lessons we wish them to draw, but all conclusions are considered valid. The listeners are drawn into the dilemma and are expected at some point in their lives to actively work themselves out of it. (11-12)

Thus, she argues, Native children “grow bored quickly under European instruction” because “not much is left to the imagination in European stories” (12). Native stories demand that the reader use imagination. (Norma says to Lionel “Always best to figure those things out for yourself” [422]; and Eli says “Can’t just tell you that straight out. Wouldn’t make any sense. Wouldn’t be much of a story” [361]). In *Life Lived Like a Story: Life Stories of Three Yukon Native Elders* Julie Cruikshank notes her expectation that the women she talked to would tell her stories about the Klondike Gold Rush or the building of the Alaska highway; instead they insisted on telling her traditional stories about how the world began and how their clan got its name. That is, to tell one’s story is to begin at the beginning. Ron and Suzanne Scollon explain that Native story tellers are sometimes reluctant to tell stories to outsiders or children because of “the length of time it can be expected to take to make things intelligible to an uninformed audience” (177). King has used all the resources of wit, pun and allusion to compress his story. He tells the story of the creation of the world in order to tell the story of Lionel Red Dog and Alberta Frank in 1992 in Blossom, Alberta, Canada. There’s a lot of material to pack in and the only way to do it is through promoting lateral (or bilateral or trilateral) cross-border thinking in the reader.



WORKS CITED

Thanks to Robin Ridington, Professor Emeritus, Anthropology, University of British Columbia, for his detailed assistance and wide knowledge of Coyote.

- Cruikshank, Julie, with Angela Sidney, Kitty Smith and Annie Ned. *Life Lived Like a Story: Life Stories of Three Yukon Native Elders*. Vancouver: U of British Columbia P, 1990.
- Deloria, Vine Jr. *Custer Died for your Sins: An Indian Manifesto*. New York: Avon, 1969.
- . *God is Red*. New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1973.
- Frye, Northrop. *The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination*. Toronto: Anansi, 1971.
- Hoxie, Frederick E., ed. "White Dog Ceremony." *Encyclopedia of North American Indians*. Boston: Houghton, 1996.
- King, Thomas. "Borders." *One Good Story, That One*. Toronto: HarperCollins, 1993. 129-45.
- . *Green Grass, Running Water*. 1993. Rpt. Toronto: HarperPerennial, 1994.
- Lowe, John. "Coyote's Jokebook: Humor in Native American Literature and Culture." *Dictionary of Native American Literature*. Ed. Andrew Wiget. New York: Garland, 1994. 193-205.
- Maracle, Lee. Preface. "You Become the Trickster." *Sojourner's Truth and Other Stories*. Vancouver: Press Gang, 1990. 11-13.
- Powell, Peter J. *Sweet Medicine: The Continuing Role of the Sacred Arrows, The Sun Dance, and the Sacred Buffalo Hat in Northern Cheyenne History*. Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1969.
- Robinson, Harry. "Coyote Challenges God." *Write It on Your Heart: The Epic World of an Okanagan Storyteller*. Comp. and ed. Wendy Wickwire. Vancouver: Talonbooks/Theytus, 1989. 119-22.
- Scollon, Ron and Suzanne B.K. Scollon. "Cooking it Up and Boiling it Down: Abstracts in Athabaskan Children's Story Retellings." *Coherence in Spoken and Written Discourse*. Ed. Deborah Tannen. *Advances in Discourse Processes*, 12. Norwood, NJ: ALEX, 1984. 173-97.
- Sturtevant, William C., gen. ed. *Handbook of the North American Indians*. Vol. IV. *History of Indian-White Relations*. Ed Wilcomb E. Washburn. Washington: Smithsonian, 1988.
- Waldman, Carl. *Atlas of the North American Indian*. Maps and illus. Molly Braun. New York: Facts on File, 1985.
- Waldram, James B. *As Long as the Rivers Run: Hydroelectric Development and Native Communities in Western Canada*. Winnipeg: U of Manitoba P, 1988.
- Wallace, Anthony F.C. *The Death and Rebirth of the Seneca*. New York: Random House, Vintage, 1969.
- Welch, James with Paul Stekler. *Killing Custer: The Battle of Little Bighorn and the Fate of the Plains Indians*. New York: Norton, 1994.
- Ywahoo, Dhyani. *Voices of our Ancestors: Cherokee Teachings from the Wisdom Fire*. Boston: Shambala, 1987.