

**The Discursive Strategies of Native Literature:  
Thomas King's Shift from Adversarial to  
Interfusional**  
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There has been a tendency in certain academic circles to associate Native literature with post-colonial literary production on account of their common concerns regarding history and, more particularly, marginalization or the process of othering. These concerns are manifest in both their thematic interests and discursive strategies. Shared themes that spring to mind are the dynamics of racial domination, the politics of location, economic and cultural dispossession, social fragmentation, identity, difference, and authenticity. Among the shared discursive strategies that have emerged, are those of interiorization, mimicry, and ambivalence anchored in the institutionalized spaces of colonialism, and the inevitable hybridization that occurs in transcultural encounters, as well as a reliance on the metaphorical, even allegorical modes linking familial history and social history, private and public memory, the particular and the universal. In an article entitled "From Richardson to Robinson to King: Colonial Assimilation and Communal Origination," David Latham was among the first critics to suggest that the Native literatures in Canada have conformed to the theoretical framework that Frantz Fanon conceptualized in *Les Damnés de la terre* with respect to the three phases characterising colonial literatures. These range from the period of unqualified assimilation—illustrated by the Métis writer John Richardson's oft-cited novel *Wacousta*, published in Edinburgh in 1832, and the nostalgic search for a vanished cultural past—manifest in Pauline Johnson's turn-of-the-century exoticist discourse couched in "the borrowed aestheticism of the imperial power" (Latham 183), to the militant phase of the past few decades to which we can attribute, say, Lee Maracle's autobiographical account *Bobbi Lee, Indian Rebel*, Maria

Campbell's *Halfbreed*, Beatrice Culleton's *In Search of April Raintree*, or Howard Adams's *Prison of Grass*. This polemical phase corresponds to an oppositional discursive strategy, in which the central issues of the texts are power, ideology, resistance to and subversion of hegemonic forces. Such a contestatory—and often binary—poetic based on an inside/outside dialectic can reduce literature to what certain critics such as Gauri Viswanathan have recently come to deplore as “a purely sociological entity subordinate to the compulsions of identity-politics” (Viswanathan 28). Significantly, certain writers from diasporic, minority, or Native communities, have turned to other models.

Mixed-blood author Thomas King in particular has come under attack from critics who place value on counter-hegemonic texts, and who expect to find in minority writing an adversarial resistance to dominant sociopolitical structures and cultural codes. When Robin Mathews reproached King at a conference in Victoria with not describing the endemic Native problems of alcohol and drugs (Hochbruck 24), he was expressing incomprehension at a narrative strategy that deviated from the expected paradigms of a writing of resistance.<sup>1</sup> King contests the identificatory term “post-colonial” on account of its accompanying notions of progress/reaction, which he suggests rest on the assumption that the literature began with the arrival of the colonizers, and place it within the essentially reductive framework of oppression and reaction. In his introduction to *All My Relations*, his anthology of contemporary Canadian fiction, King articulated the difficulties of defining aboriginal literature in a nuanced and complex fashion diametrically opposed to the firm categorical stance taken by his Australian counterpart, Mudrooroo, whose notions on indigeneity and appropriation ironically became problematic when his own aboriginal identity subsequently became the subject of controversy.<sup>2</sup>

King's praxis corresponds to the theoretical signposts he lays out for Native literature in his landmark article “Godzilla vs. Post-Colonial” (King 12).<sup>3</sup> His third novel, *Truth and Bright Water*—along with his first two novels *Medicine River* and *Green Grass, Running Water* and his collection of short stories, *One Good Story, That One*, as well as his

latest novel, *Dreadful Water Shows Up*—does not correspond totally to the quaternitarian construct he propounds, in that it is not tribal, in the sense of being written in a Native language for members of a specific tribe. The five texts do more or less concur with the other three premises. They can be described as weakly polemical in King's sense: in other words revolving round the collision of Native and non-Native cultures. Above all, they are interfusional—involving the blending of oral storytelling and print culture—and associational, notably focusing on the group rather than the individual, and addressing issues relevant to contemporary community experiences. These last two dimensions are the ones most susceptible of dealing with social preoccupations in an alternate manner, and of deviating writerly, readerly and critical focus away from often-entrenched confrontational modes of representation towards more indirect modes.

In this essay, I shall explore the oblique modes of representation that King sets up as an alternative to the frontal modes of militant writing. Focussing on the novel concluding his prairie trilogy, *Truth and Bright Water*,<sup>4</sup> I shall show that the author is a committed writer who does engage in a societal critique encompassing the issues of prejudice, assimilation, acculturation, and ghettoization, without ignoring those of violence and militancy. I shall argue that although this quintessentially political agenda does not shy away from the polemics of a Native/non-Native cultural rift, it demonstrates a process of othering within the white community itself through the tactics of defamiliarization and reversal. King's associational and interfusional stances forge an intercommunal experience on a double level. On one level—the surface diegetic level—they foreground the dysfunctions within the reserve and non-reserve Native communities alike and universalize them. On a deeper discursive level, they universalize authentic indigenous experiential events by conflating the traditions of aboriginal oral storytelling with the postmodern mode of self-conscious storytelling. My formalistic, tropological reading of the novel will examine in particular the techniques of indirection that King deploys in his textual construction, and will strive to account for the purpose of such a strategy of the oblique.

Set in a liminal zone comprising a small town on the American border—Truth—and a Native reserve—Bright Water—on the opposite Canadian side of the river that serves as geographical demarcation, *Truth and Bright Water* is a novel infused with a Western sensibility generated by its distinctive prairie landscape. It does explore a fractured and dysfunctional society through the eyes of a fifteen-year-old Native boy named after a figure of resistance: Tecumseh, the Shawnee chief who attempted to unite western tribes against the whites, and who died fighting the Americans in the War of 1812. The first-person narrative reveals the world of Natives on and off the reserve interacting with white society yet relegated in multiple ways to the periphery. Public issues such as prejudice, crime, chronic unemployment, poverty, domestic violence, alcohol, and Indian militancy are not skirted in the text but, rather than met head-on, are presented in elliptic and paralytic modes, while concentric circles of distancing or indirection are produced in diverse ways such as parallelism, irony—slippery by definition—or deferral. Allusions to Indians making up the largest percentage of Canada's prison population abound. We learn that there are always half a dozen men hanging around the job gate looking for day work, and that Wally Preston, who is "nice enough," "always hires the white guys before he hires Indians" (42). Tecumseh's shiftless father, Elvin, holds down no steady job, and makes money smuggling goods into Canada—the latest lucrative merchandise being the toxic waste that American hospitals "can't toss down the sink" (87). The reserve itself is tainted by corruption on several levels, each with metaphorical resonances: the band's chief—Tecumseh's uncle, Franklin—bought his own election for ten dollars a vote, and tried to make money for the band by opening up a toxic landfill before setting up an RV park only to find that:

the mushy stuff that was supposed to flow in one end of the system and out the other began bubbling up in the washrooms and the showers and gurgling around the Winnebagos and the kingcab pickups and the Volkswagen campers, until most of

the parking pads were covered with a soft mustard-coloured slick. (106)

Many of the problems encountered by the protagonists on a micro level are identified as being rooted in broader—even institutionalized—social evils grounded in the inclusionary/exclusionary dynamics of the hegemonic white community. King does intersperse his text with polemical references to a monolithic *doxa* that perpetuates inequality. He notably creates an equivalence with a political edge through parallelism when Elvin tells his son Tecumseh that he can't take his dog Soldier across the border to Bright Water: “‘They won't let dogs across,’ says my father. ‘Used to be the same for Indians’” (87). Nevertheless, King's confrontation of social ills deviates both centripetally and centrifugally from the traditional adversarial, binary approach. Moving inwards, it shifts the critique to the Native community itself, highlighting its internal dysfunctions. Simultaneously moving outwards, it focuses on abuses that are transcultural precisely because—in a paradoxical fashion—they belong to the private, and universal, sphere of the home and family, or, more specifically, are anchored in the monolithic intercontinental tradition of patriarchy regulating both public and private spheres of life. King notably constructs the role of the father—role in the Greimasian sense of programme rendering the narrative predictable<sup>5</sup>—through two figures who are inadequate in different but complementary ways. A chronic drinker, Elvin neglects his wife and child, does not provide for them, and deserts them. King evokes the spectre of domestic violence, suggesting the patterns of abuse indirectly through the device of the fallible narrator, who triggers disapproval in the reader by withholding disapproval himself:

Sometimes he gets angry and swings at things. But he doesn't really mean it, and he always gives us plenty of time to get out of the way. (7)

Elvin's brother, Franklin, on the other hand, does not give his son time to get out of the way. Tecumseh's cousin, Lum, whose mother is dead, is regularly and brutally beaten to the point of being maimed. One cannot fail to note that the privileges of patriarchy and male solidarity are targeted when Elvin defends Franklin's right to raise his son as he sees fit, and when the novel concludes on the boy's leaping off the bridge to his death, the aunts who refuse to offer Franklin their condolences concretize both the authorial value judgment subtending the narrator's non-judgmental point of view and readerly disapproval. Commenting on the distancing effect generated through the vast oppressive presence of the prairie in which rather fantastical wild dogs roam, and through the characters of the narrator's cousin and mother—the former disturbing and the latter sympathetic but ambivalent—King has asserted that he intended to underline the fact that “there is no salvation for these kids within the community,” that “[t]here is no one there to protect them because in many cases [Native people have] wound up in a position where they're hardly able to protect themselves” (Andrews 168). The writer's focus on the domestic, on familial relationships and community bonds, and his sensitivity to the powerless—whether it be gendered subject or child—is thus a representation of indigenous life experience, in which mono-parental family units are rife, yet simultaneously, in the vein of the associational dimension of Native literature, a bringing together of cultures in a global community.

More interestingly, with a view to subverting it, the writer focuses on a particular aspect of this global community, namely the late-capitalist dynamics of cultural commodification and cross-cultural symbolic exchange. Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) presented the notion of exoticism as a mode of aesthetic perception obeying a certain form of power-politics. In *Truth and Bright Water*, we can see that it is actually on an ontological plane that exoticism functions dialectically, manufacturing otherness all the while that it domesticates the other's strangeness. In a paper given at a conference at the University of Lethbridge and then published in King's collection of essays *The Native in Literature: Canadian and Comparative Perspectives* before becoming

a full-length book, Terry Goldie evoked the now-notorious phrase “Lo, the poor Indian” taken from Pope’s *Essay on Man*, which gave rise to the nineteenth-century caricature of a dejected-looking Indian named ‘Lo’. Goldie’s aim was to illustrate how we transform life into an artistic representation and then subvert the representative mode for parodic purposes, the first movement—from life to art—being actually greater than that from art to art, albeit more imperceptible (Goldie, “Fear and Temptation” 67). Re/presenting the other in conformity with one’s own ideology—which Said dubbed “orientalism” when applied to the Third World—generates the exoticism in its anthropological, touristy, and multicultural forms that King identifies in the narrative sequences devoted to the Indian Days events organised annually on the reserve. The tourists arrive from all parts of the United States, Canada, Germany, and Japan for what they see as an exotic site and spectacle. Through the open-ended incremental devices of polysyndeton, repetition, and parallelism, the spectatorship metamorphoses into a neocolonial form of invasion: the traditional races, which originally were run exclusively by the men of the tribe, have been territorialized by whites “in their Nike sweatsuits and Nike shoes and Nike headbands, setting their Nike stopwatches” (228). The German tourists even dress up as Indians, with buckskin beaded shirts, fringed leather pants, medallions, and painted faces. They indiscriminately buy up furs, dream catchers, beaded necklaces, wooden carvings of totem animals: all artefacts to take back to their Indian clubs in Germany, offering nostalgic visions of colonial history.

Interestingly, King combats the ideology behind the neocolonial commodification of Native culture by first placing it within the broader socioeconomic phenomenon that Graham Huggan has termed the “alterity industry” (Huggan x). Through the tactics of defamiliarization, recontextualization and interchangeability, King demonstrates that a process of othering exists within the white community itself. To this end, he uses the Trickster figure of Monroe Swimmer, who leaves the reserve to become a commercially successful, internationally-acclaimed painter. In a proleptic sequence that is antithetically parallel to the

scene in which German tourists dress up as Indians, the young Monroe Swimmer calls attention to the marketability of all ethnic quaintness, even within the dominant European paradigm:

he borrowed a tuba from the Mormon church over in Cardston and got his auntie to make him a pair of short pants out of elk hide with elk hide suspenders. And when Indian Days came around and the crowds of tourists were everywhere, he marched through the booths and the tipis, puffing on the tuba, pretending to be the Bright Water German Club. (26)

Monroe's cultural appropriation in reverse makes use of the metonymical functions of vestimentary dynamics, and recontextualizes the semiotic packaging of cultural stereotypes—tuba and lederhosen replacing beads and feathers and creating equivalence. But King goes even further. He subverts the exoticist discourse functioning as an assimilationist mechanism of control, which satisfies the desire to know the other yet erases its authenticity by familiarizing and appropriating it. He playfully turns the tables on the reification and commodification of the Indigene within white settler semiotic economies that Terry Goldie has analyzed. King in effect satirizes the phenomenon of exoticist demand, by inverting and subverting the late-capitalist mechanics of supply and demand. He has the commodity itself taking charge of the commodification process and seeking to regulate demand by acting on supply. His Native characters ironically call their reserve-cum-tourist trap "Happy Trails"—the title of the song in the popular Gene Autry television western series churning out Indian stereotypes. The Bright Water residents make profits on the exotic myths. They put tourists on the sidecar of a motorcycle and charge them \$35 a buffalo run in which they shoot buffalo with a paint slat gun: "white man's wet dream" (160), according to Lum. The furs the tourists snap up as authentic products of a dying hunting-gathering society are shams on multiple levels: they have been bought, not trapped, and purchased moreover "from a white guy in Los Angeles" (245)—in other words, they originate from a different nation



and a different ethnocultural community, both alien to the group they are meant to symbolize. Similarly, the 'authentic' carvings of turtles or coyotes are metamorphosed: to satisfy consumer demand, Elvin carves animals more familiar to the tourists' experience, or—albeit inappropriate to the location—more familiar to their conception of exoticism:

When my father first started making them, he stuck pretty much to bears and buffalo and eagles. But there were a lot of calls for things like moose and beaver, too, and before long, he was making up turtles and rabbits and dogs and cats as well. He made up an elephant for one customer and a giraffe for another. (244)

One cannot fail to note the ambivalence that is so central to postcolonial discourse theory. Is the text depicting contamination, interiorization, acculturation or hybridity? When—in order to sell her wares—Edna puts on “her Indian face” (223), makes elaborate signs gleaned from Hollywood westerns, and sings a round dance with a small drum, does her merchandizing technique involve loss of dignity and control? Although Western society demonstrates its power and consolidates its position of dominance through acculturation, notably its immense capacity to absorb minor cultures without losing any of its intrinsic traits, King in his novel stages a strategy of resistance that Peter Kulchyski has described as “semiotic reversal”—namely:

taking structures, signs, technologies and so on that have been deployed by the established order and reversing them, deploying them in a manner that works against their intended effects. (Kulchyski 64)

In effect, echoing the dynamics of the other two novels of the trilogy, King's Native characters exploit in a creative way the stereotyped images of the Other that have been projected onto them, thereby demonstrating an acquired mastery of the domains of technology, commercializa-

tion, marketing and packaging that are commonly associated with white civilization. In a liberating reversal of exoticism that is simultaneously a process of hybridization, the objects of the process through which the cultural other is translated domesticate the process and become agents themselves.

The playful representation of the hybridization occurring in trans-cultural encounters is part of King's interfusional approach, which involves blending the digressive narrative strategy and heavily intrusive narratorial voice rooted in the oral mode of indigenous storytelling with the postmodern mode of self-conscious storytelling that is equally interested in the artistic process to a greater extent than in the product. Penny Petrone has remarked that Native discourse traditionally resorts to devices that Western readers tend to consider literary—namely figurative language, analogy, parallelism, symbolism and allegory. Moreover, Native discourse is by nature hybrid, mixing—as does the postmodern aesthetic current—formal narrative and informal storytelling, and containing fragments of politicized discourse along with song or prayer, for instance.<sup>6</sup> *Truth and Bright Water's* network of linguistic and rhetorical convergences is even more syncretic than such a first perusal would indicate, and may disturb academics in quest of an authenticity that cannot be other than an artificial construct. Wolfgang Hochbruck has judiciously argued that critics have thoroughly investigated the background in Indian lore of Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*—a seminal text in the history of Native literature, the first to gain critical acclaim and popular recognition through the Pulitzer Prize—but that:

few have discussed the influences on Momaday of, for example, William Faulkner, as if to be influenced by Faulkner was in some way a continuation of a colonial discourse rather than an expectable move in the process of literary history. (Hochbruck 22)

Modernist experimentation with language, such as Faulkner's—with its rhizomatic narrative strategy and repetitive incantatory rhythm belonging both to the intricate contrived mode of print texts and the apparently free-flowing iterative, digressive mode of oral discourse—has undeniably influenced contemporary writing. Yet postmodern writing can be traced back in turn to baroque aesthetic practices of convolution and indirection, privileging, as did Sterne, enunciation over proposition with a view to producing a fertile disorder. King's oblique mode of writing—with its hermeneutic code, its digressive apologues, its juxtapositions of proleptic and analeptic sequences, its contiguity of antithetical parallelisms, its ventriloquistic structural irony, and its systemic recourse to counterpoint—belongs to the postmodern metatextual aesthetic stance of self-conscious fiction. Yet, suffused as it is with perlocutionary markers that replace the oral storyteller's intonation and gesture with a view to generating connotation and triggering response on the part of the receptor, and recurrently contaminating the singulative with the iterative to produce temporal blurring, his writing dovetails with traditional oral forms of representation centred on the connotative function of language, and that also call attention to the text as construct and as process.

The scope of this essay will not allow me to elaborate on the countless techniques of indirection that King deploys in his textual construction, some of which I have just mentioned. I shall focus instead in this final part of my paper on the oblique mode that consists in naming concrete things in detail so as to suggest abstract concepts—a strategy corresponding to what Roland Barthes has described as the indirect language of literature, consisting in designating the world as a repertory of signs but leaving open the domain of the signified (Barthes 264). *Truth and Bright Water* is 'peopled' with objects that resonate more than any explicitly stated utterance ever could. These ordinary—and less ordinary—objects are endowed with synecdochic ontological value, as if the whole world of signification were concentrated in the lowest forms of reality. These are central, recurrent leitmotifs that shimmer, deflect and reverberate, generating the networks of significance. They range

from a human skull with a red ribbon in its eye sockets, bouquets of wilted flowers, a doll incongruously given to a boy, iron buffalo, or a painted-over church that vanishes, reverting back to prairie and sky, to a saw, a three-letter tattoo whose resonance shifts mirror-like from armed resistance (AIM: the American Indian Movement) to love and loss (MIA: the name of a mysteriously vanished child), a Kharmann Ghia, and a patchwork quilt. Tecumseh and Lum discover the skull with a hole in it; with its Gothic and carnivalesque overtones, it is a *memento mori* lying grotesquely at the heart of an enigma that hermeneutically unfolds in parallel with the enigmas surrounding the lexical mirroring AIM/MIA. The reverse mirror device functions in the manner of both oxymoron and chiasmus, triggering a combinatory shifting pattern that constructs and deconstructs interchangeable twinships involving the narrator's mother and her sister Cassie, inseparable and identical until they exchange roles one evening and thereby irreparably exchange their young men: Elvin and his also inseparable companion, who in the manner of an anamorphosis changes from Franklin into Monroe Swimmer. The progressive interweaving of skull and tattoo sets up the confrontation between inner and outer worlds, blurring the natural object—sphere of the cosmic and the sublime—with the culturally constructed object of the doll, which along with other gifts that are socially connoted as playthings for girls, the AIM-less or MIA-less Cassie sends her small nephew. The double con/fusion—on the part of both authorial design and character motivation—drives the narrative forward and introduces a plane of ontological reflexion.

The Kharmann Ghia and the quilt are concretizations of the litanic device of the refrain, synecdochic objects that function inversely to cultural programming and readerly anticipation which tend to evoke, respectively, notions of mobility and domestic comfort. The sports car that does not run—a gift from Elvin to his young wife—that for years he has never gotten round to fixing, is the concrete sign of all the expectations, disappointments and promises never kept that break down bonds. Concretization characteristically produces amplification, and equally characteristically produces a comical effect when reiterated.

The Kharmann Ghia refrain is no exception. Without sacrificing the darker side of the waste and emptiness of a trick of fate and male abandonment, the repeated allusions to Elvin forever waiting for spare parts generate the “slant laughter” (Andrews 169) that the author substitutes for the earnestness of militant writing. The patchwork quilt is an objective correlative concretizing the narrator’s mother’s state of mind and resistance to victimization. In a fashion that recalls Odysseus’s Penelope—similar but opposite—the young woman has been creating and decreating for years. Initially, the quilt conformed to the codes of traditional craftsmanship, composed of the identifiable geometric patterns of cloth that go by names such as Sunburst and Harvest Star. Then the mother began to assert control and the geometric forms turned into freehand patterns that evoked the landscape of Truth and Bright Water and figures that connect with the MIA motif, to be reconstructed in turn by the reader. Finally, she began sewing into the quilt, over patterns that had already been completed, incongruous objects such as chicken feet, fishbones or hair. The quilt, an atomic vision of the real, becomes process—a process of agency and individuation—as well as pure aporia: we learn through the device of structural irony, when the naive or fallible narrator surmises—without seeing the paradox in the encounter of the perfective mode and the present continuous—on why it has “taken [his] mother so long to finish and why she is still working on it” (63). The reader must correct and complete the partial, inadequate or erroneous account offered quietly by the boy, who reveals quite indirectly, in casual parenthetical insertions ostensibly adding mere precision of detail, joined by the single coordinator “and” implying equivalence in attributes, that the nature of the appended objects, and thus of the quilt itself, has moved into the sphere of the deadly:

my mother has also fastened unexpected things to the quilt, such as the heavy metal washers that run along the outside edges and the clusters of needles that she has worked into the stitching just below the fish hooks and the chickens’ feathers.  
(63)

The casual mention of the presence of razor blades also sewn onto the top of the quilt is almost superfluous: we readers know better than to accept at face value the boy narrator's confident remark that "you'd be safe enough as long as you were under the quilt and weren't moving around on the outside, trying to get in" (64). Concentric circles of resonances intermesh with gap-filling narrative sequences, allowing the receptor to piece together the chiasmatic story of a lover appropriated by an interchangeable other, and a child and a life with the wrong man. The young narrator sees and thus tells none of this: for him the glittering objects sewn onto the quilt serve an innocent aesthetic purpose, and procure pleasure:

What I liked best were the needles. When you held the quilt up, they would tinkle like little bells and flash in the light like knives. (64)

Yet for the reader, the resonance of the closing simile—"like knives"—overlaps with and cancels out the naively bucolic simile. The quilt is a bright object radiating darkness, absence, helplessness, rage and pain.

The objects in King's novel that I have been discussing are isotopies that do serve an architectural narrative function linked to diegetic event, but they are particularly linked to the phenomenon of consciousness, substituting themselves in a way for the former writerly use of the symbol. Interestingly, King also deploys objects in a metatextual way, with a view to generating ontological reflexion on perception, on the relationship between art and life, and on the artistic process itself. Monroe Swimmer, back in his hometown, has bought an abandoned church and is painting it out of existence. At his first glimpse, Tecumseh tells us that the entire east side of the church "*is* gone" or "at least *looks* gone" (44, emphases mine). The artist has painted the side so that it blends in with the prairies and the sky, so well that the boy stumbles across "an open door hanging in the middle of the prairies... [a] door hanging in space" (45). When the process is completed, Monroe has demonstrated the power of the painter: he can reach into the prai-

rie and the sky, open the invisible door, and literally disappear inside (132). Presence and absence collide and coexist, creating existential aporia, signalled by the antithetical parallelism “used to be/isn’t” and reinforced by the multiple emphatic devices of enumeration, parataxis, anaphora, word sentences and phonic pause:

I know where the church used to be. Across the river and on the bluff above Truth. But even from this distance, I can see that it isn’t there anymore. No roof, no steeple, no door. No church. (230)

The feat is part of a larger project. Monroe takes art out of museums and into nature, also reversing the traditional mimetic paradigm in which art imitates nature. Monroe in effect has art teaching nature. He puts a bright blue kite into the air to Teach the Sky about Blue, sets a brilliant green platform in the midst of the prairie grass labelled “Teaching the Grass about Green,” that Tecumseh literally falls over, and plans to Teach the Night about Dark. He repopulates the prairies with buffalo—iron buffalo of different shapes and sizes on spikes, that he groups and nails into rises and valleys, so that they lean into the wind “like rocks in a river” (144). One could identify his artistic performance as a demiurge’s performative act, in the sense of Austen’s speech act, for, as Monroe suggests, life will eventually imitate art: “Each day, the herd will grow larger and larger.... Before we’re done, the buffalo will return” (144).

Beyond the self-reflexive aesthetic exploration of the artistic process, King’s concentration of meaning in objects, and their transformation into signs, are representative of a general postmodern interrogation of literary realism. As he acknowledges in an *SCL* interview, the writer challenges the *doxa* that makes a distinction between what we can imagine and what we see, and he is “concerned about breaking the borders down between reality and fantasy” (Andrews 179). The extraordinary emerges from the ordinary less dramatically and less recurrently in his third novel than in *Green Grass, Running Water*, in which in King’s own words “the real, as it were, and the fantastic are so inter-

twined so as to dovetail into one another that it's hard to draw the line between where one ends and the other begins" (Andrews 179). Yet the novel closing the trilogy does participate in the mode of magic realism, that, according to critics such as Stephen Slemon, is particularly operative in cultures situated at the fringes of mainstream literary traditions. *Truth and Bright Water* is an interfusional text that underscores the composite nature of any cultural heritage, beautifully illustrating the phenomenon of cultural cross-fertilization. It is anchored in traditional Native stories that are poles apart from literary realism, peopled with fabulous characters and events. Yet it participates equally in the postmodern challenge of established Eurocentric authoritative systems such as generic classification. This interrogation can be placed within a larger epistemological framework, for King thoughtfully incites readers to participate in the episteme of their own culture, demonstrating that it is culturally determined. The writer's oblique or slant mode, in a meiotic manner, serves to amplify what it understates, and the indirect language of literature transforms the remarkably aesthetic text into a bright object that continues to reverberate in the mind of the receiver.

## Notes

- 1 A French readership avid for exoticist discourse has displayed a significantly similar reaction. In a talk that Thomas King gave to my students on 20 May 1997, at the university in Rennes where I was teaching at the time, and in a subsequent address and discussion I organized at the literary/philosophical café, Le Café des Citoyens, on the theme "Is There a Native Literature?" King suggested certain characteristics subtending Native literatures, comprising a distinctive perception of History with its corresponding relationships between God, humans, animals, and the land, or even good and evil. At the prestigious international festival *Etonnants Voyageurs* held annually in Saint-Malo and devoted that year to Native Writing, King had given readings alongside other major contemporary Native writers such as James Walsh (*Medicine River* was in fact the very first novel to be translated in France in major French publisher Albin Michel's new collection *Terre indienne*, launched at the same time). But he pointed out to his Rennes audiences that the general public in Saint Malo had been perplexed when he and the other invited writers were not discussing alcohol, poverty, or victimization.



## The Discursive Strategies of Native Literature

- 2 In the critical work on Aboriginal literature first published in 1990, in which Mudrooroo (Colin Johnson) set out to designate the works that could lay claim to the appellation of "Aboriginal," he denounced the first Aboriginal-authored bestseller *My Place* (1987) as a work of appropriation, claiming that Sally Walker was actually an outsider to indigenous culture. Interestingly, his own roots were revealed to be white and African-American (cf. *Australian Magazine*, 20-21 July 1996, and *West Australian*, 27 July 1996), and he himself acknowledged that when he was first categorized as Aboriginal in the introduction to his first novel *Wild Cat Falling*, he chose to "go along with" the designation (Mudrooroo, "Tell Them You're Indian" 263).
- 3 Originally published in 1990, King's text has since been reprinted in Ajay Heble et al's *New Contexts of Canadian Criticism*.
- 4 For discussions of his first novels, *Medicine River* and *Green Grass, Running Water*, see M. Dvorak, "Thomas King's Christopher Cartier and Jacques Columbus," *Arachne, an Interdisciplinary Journal of the Humanities* 5.1 (1998): 120-139, and "Thomas King's Fusion and Confusion: or What Happened to My Earth Without Form?" *Commonwealth* 19.1 (autumn 1996): 86-95.
- 5 Greimas's role, rather like a stock character, corresponds to readerly experience—both exophoric and endophoric—thus setting up a certain expectation and enabling the narrative to move forward.
- 6 Following Hochbruck's suggestion (22), based in turn on the argument Werner Sollors expounds in *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Literary History* (1986), it would make sense to explore as well the possible analogies between Native texts and African-American ones.

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