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Against Mastery: Teaching Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water*

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Thomas King's novel Green Grass, Running Water *stands as an indictment of North American colonialism and the continuing injustices facing indigenous peoples; it also offers valuable insights in terms of what constitutes good teaching. With reference to personal experiences of teaching the novel in a large lecture course, this article discusses its author's efforts at implementing the novel's implied pedagogical principles, which include a scepticism about granting authority to certain texts over others; a collaborative model of learning; a wariness regarding totalizing narratives and claims of interpretive mastery; and a need to wrestle in class discussion with texts' unresolved problematics.*

Keywords: authority, *Green Grass, Running Water*, indigenous literatures, pedagogy, self-reflexivity, Thomas King

A few years ago, at the end of my final lecture on *Green Grass, Running Water* for the Canadian literature survey course I was teaching, a student approached me with a smile and said, "You taught the shit out of that book." I left the classroom feeling pretty pleased. Only later did it dawn on me that I would have to head back to the drawing board.

It must be said, there is a lot of shit in *Green Grass, Running Water*. Originally published in 1993, it is the highly acclaimed second novel by Thomas King, an American-born Canadian writer of Cherokee, Greek, and German descent. In no small part a wide-ranging indictment of North American colonialism, *Green Grass, Running Water* does not shy from the scatological as it makes its points both trenchantly and comically. One of the funniest moments involves a parody of the biblical flood narrative; in King's version, Noah has a "big white canoe with lots of animals in it," and, along with them, "poop everywhere." This Noah insists he is running a "Christian ship" with "Christian rules," and he also has a breast fixation.[1] As King's depiction of him suggests, *Green Grass, Running Water* is hardly subtle in suggesting that attempts to dominate others and to contain the entire world authoritatively within one's purview are literally and figuratively full of shit. With that element of the novel in mind as I considered my student's comment, I admired her

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1 Thomas King, *Green Grass, Running Water* (Toronto, ON: HarperCollins, 1994), 144–46.

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cleverness in nodding to one of the text's key motifs. But her comment also made it sound as though I had asserted a kind of mastery over King's book. Given that such assertions are one of the novel's prime satirical targets, I felt I was on shaky pedagogical ground.

Each year in which I have taught the Canadian literature survey at my university, always a class of at least one hundred students, I have arranged the readings more or less chronologically. Each year, a key exception has been *Green Grass, Running Water*. As our inaugural text, it helps the students and me to think from the outset about colonialism as a central condition of Canada and its literatures.[2] Also, it doesn't hurt that *Green Grass, Running Water* is a student favorite, even as it offers a challenging read with its multiple, interweaving narrative threads. In one thread, the novel depicts a contemporary Blackfoot community in southern Alberta; in another, it relates the story of four indigenous elders traveling to that community after escaping incarceration in Florida's Fort Marion. The elders are, remarkably, the same figures who appear in versions of indigenous creation stories told by two heterodiegetic characters: the trickster Coyote and an unnamed narrator. As the novel develops these threads, it parodies multiple texts, from the Bible and *Moby-Dick* to the Hollywood Western, while making dozens of cultural and historical allusions, many of them in the service of condemning colonialism. In this sense, as well, *Green Grass, Running Water* has a lot of shit in it.

The novel has a lot of teaching in it, too. Not only does the text seek to educate its readers about colonialism and other hierarchical systems, but it also repeatedly makes educative points about the act of teaching, and it does so by depicting situations in which characters attempt to instruct others. In that regard, it is striking that much of the teaching portrayed in *Green Grass, Running Water* is not very effective. In fact, much of it is represented as fundamentally wrongheaded, manifesting the same authoritarianism that, as the novel insists, structures colonial relations. Through examples of bad teaching, and through instances of more laudable instruction, *Green Grass, Running Water* points the way toward what is required of an ethical pedagogy. Not least, the novel insists that students and teachers alike must resist an impulse toward mastery: that is, toward a totalizing knowledge that implies dominance over the object of knowledge. In contrast with mastery, the novel promotes a pedagogy in

2 One should note, as I do in lectures, that King has argued against indigenous North American literature being called "postcolonial." In an essay first published in 1990, King observes that such a label problematically places the European arrival in North America at the center of thinking about indigenous peoples and "assumes that the struggle between guardian and ward is the catalyst for contemporary Native literature, providing those of us who write with method and topic." King goes on to observe: "the idea of post-colonial writing effectively cuts us off from our traditions, traditions that were in place before colonialism ever became a question, traditions which have come down to us through our cultures in spite of colonization, and it supposes that contemporary Native writing is largely a construct of oppression." See Thomas King, "Godzilla vs. Post-Colonial," *Unhomely States: Theorizing English-Canadian Postcolonialism*, ed. Cynthia Sugars (Orchard Park, NY: Broadview, 2004), 185. Insofar as *Green Grass, Running Water* repeatedly presents parodic creation stories involving traumatic first encounters between indigenous and European characters, one might plausibly consider King's novel itself to be, at least in part, "a construct of oppression." At the same time, King's repeated foregrounding of precolonial indigenous traditions—including that of creation stories—works to undermine the notion that the novel is a product of colonialism alone.

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which everyone is acknowledged as fallible, and no single person can ever know or tell a story that contains everything.

Considering the novel's pedagogical implications has meant that my experiences of teaching *Green Grass, Running Water* have also been experiences of the novel teaching me. I have become increasingly conscious of the ways in which a traditional lecture-driven course is liable to foster an illusory ideal of mastery, and I have responded by modifying my pedagogy, both with respect to King's novel and as a whole. At the same time, I have increasingly drawn attention in classes to the meta-pedagogical elements of King's novel, doing so with the conviction that a truly liberationist pedagogy must be articulated to students as well as to teachers. In this article, I aim to contribute to the published scholarship on *Green Grass, Running Water* and suggest possibilities for teaching the novel by elaborating on the pedagogy that I see the text modeling and advocating. I also discuss how *Green Grass, Running Water*, in its educative drive, raises issues for which it does not have clear-cut answers. Scholars addressing the text have tended to avoid foregrounding these issues, choosing instead to serve as exegetes for its more unambiguous political implications.[3] The pedagogical principles that the novel expresses militate against such merely paraphrastic work, however; rather, they suggest a need to teach the novel in a manner that grapples with the text's various unresolved problematics.

The Oppressiveness of Textual Hierarchies

The fact that the challenge *Green Grass, Running Water* makes to colonialism is also a challenge to certain modes of pedagogy is implicit from the novel's first pages, which feature a reworking of the creation story in the book of Genesis. In King's retelling, God is not the world's prime mover but the product of Coyote dreaming: "one of those dreams gets loose" and decides, after Coyote tells him he can be a dog, that he is "god," instead. "Isn't that cute," Coyote responds. "That Dog Dream has everything backward."[4] This opening instantiates a key method of the novel: namely, the parody of texts canonized in the West. The effect of the parody is to expose their oppressive elements, undermine their authority, and suggest their susceptibility to radical, dehierarchizing revisions.

In classes discussing the novel's opening, I ask students what it means for King to rewrite the biblical creation story, in particular. As we discuss this question, we also consider a passage that occurs a few pages later in *Green Grass, Running Water*. King describes a character named First Woman falling from the sky to an Earth covered

3 Among the many valuable scholarly contributions to understandings of the novel's politics are Goldman's regarding "Native resistance" and Lamont-Stewart's regarding the novel's representation of gender, along with Kerber's and Lousley's regarding the text's environmental politics. See Marlene Goldman, "Mapping and Dreaming: Native Resistance in *Green Grass, Running Water*," *Canadian Literature* 161/162 (1999): 18–41; Linda Lamont-Stewart, "Androgyny as Resistance to Authoritarianism in Two Postmodern Canadian Novels," *Mosaic* 30 (1997): 115–30; Jenny Kerber, *Writing in Dust: Reading the Prairie Environmentally* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2011); Cheryl Lousley, "'Hosanna Da, Our Home on Natives' Land': Environmental Justice and Democracy in Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water*," *Essays on Canadian Writing* 81 (2004): 17–44.
4 King, *Green*, 1–2.

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entirely in water, co-creating land out of mud, and then meeting Ahdamn, who proceeds to go about "naming everything":

> You are a microwave oven, Ahdamn tells the Elk.
> Nope, says that Elk. Try again.
> You are a garage sale, Ahdamn tells the Bear.
> We got to get you some glasses, says the Bear.
> You are a telephone book, Ahdamn tells the Cedar Tree.
> You're getting closer, says the Cedar Tree.[5]

In talking with students about what it means for Ahdamn to name others as he does, I have found it useful to provide the class with the biblical passages being parodied: Genesis 1:28–29, in which God grants Adam and Eve "dominion" over the natural world; and Genesis 2:19–20, in which Adam names the animals. Examining these passages in relation to King's text, students are quick to observe that the talking animals in *Green Grass, Running Water*, along with their talking back to Ahdamn, stand as challenges to the Bible's anthropocentrism. Students are also liable to note the anachronism of Ahdamn's statements and to suggest that the novel is, via those anachronisms, linking the Bible's anthropocentrism to a modern consumerism predicated on the objectification and exploitation of the natural environment.[6] Thus, we see King raising a point that he goes on to reiterate in the novel: namely, that if a story is granted authority over other stories in terms of its worldview, it can have profound, long-term, often destructive effects. As *Green Grass, Running Water* subsequently parodies texts such as *Robinson Crusoe* and Westerns, it does further counter-canonizing work, especially by drawing attention to the stereotype of the savage, silent, vanquished Indian that has been an oppressive constituent of the colonial master narrative.

One challenge in discussing this aspect of *Green Grass, Running Water* with a large, diverse group of undergraduate students is that every year more than a few of them lack familiarity with many of the canonical texts and genres being parodied. Accordingly, the Bible is not the only text from which I supply the class with excerpts. In this respect, an especially useful resource has been the 2009 National Film Board documentary *Reel Injun: On the Trail of the Hollywood Indian*, directed by Cree filmmaker Neil Diamond. *Reel Injun* shares with *Green Grass, Running Water* in critiquing the Western, in particular, for having perpetuated racist notions of indigenous peoples. One scene in *Reel Injun* has been especially effective when screened in class: it features Lakota activist Russell Means describing his feelings as a child in cinemas as he watched the Indian characters being slaughtered at the end of every Western. Means's description is interspersed with clips from such films, so that the scene provides us with examples of the sort of Westerns similarly alluded to in *Green Grass, Running Water*, even as the documentary shares with us personal testimony about the harm that such films have inflicted.

5 Ibid., 41.
6 King himself has written elsewhere that the creation story in Genesis evokes "a particular universe governed by a set of hierarchies—God, man, animals, plants—that celebrate law, order, and good government." See King, *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative* (Toronto, ON: Anansi, 2003), 23.

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Likewise, I draw on audio-visual materials when we talk about Portland Looking Bear, a Blackfoot character in King's novel whose pursuit of Hollywood stardom leads him to adopt the name Iron Eyes Screeching Eagle and accept roles in which he is asked to act out some of the worst clichés of the Hollywood Indian. In class, I point out the allusion in Portland's stage name to Toni de Corti, an Italian-American who gained fame after changing his name to Iron Eyes Cody and playing Indians in Hollywood while claiming to be an Indian offscreen, too. I show students the iconic television commercial for which Cody is best known, a 1971 public service announcement about pollution in which Cody, alone and silent in buckskin, canoes through an industrial wasteland, then has litter thrown at him from a passing car and sheds a single tear in close-up. King's novel helps us to redirect our attention from the ad's environmentalism to its perpetuation of racial stereotypes. As students identify the stereotypes and their functions, they are able to make links between the ad and other texts—whether ones referenced in King's novel or ones the students have encountered elsewhere—with respect to the shared rehearsal of racist colonial myths. Catherine Rainwater has observed that "[l]earning about the art and literature of Native American tribal cultures requires the initial step of getting rid of 'obscuring projections'—preconceived ideas and images of Indians."[7] In my course, the discussion of stereotypes in the ad and other texts has been a way of taking that step with students. At the outset, they may not be familiar with many of the texts that King's novel targets, but as we identify colonial stereotypes' prevalence across textual hierarchies and across North American history, students are better able to apprehend the damage that can be caused, not least when texts rehearsing those stereotypes become canonized and gain traction along with influence in the cultural imagination.

The challenge that *Green Grass, Running Water* makes to literary canons is, moreover, a challenge to the authority vested in stories that are written down. That much is evident in the depiction of a character named Dr. Joseph Hovaugh, who is trying to find the four indigenous elders after their escape from Fort Marion, and who believes that he can solve the mystery of their vanishing by studying the book in his possession, which records the elders' long history of similar disappearances. Hovaugh's insistence on finding a totalizing explanation through attention to textual patterns comes up short, though, and in other situations in the novel, too, King suggests that written texts, simply because they are written, often accrue an illusory aura of authoritativeness. For instance, a character named Lionel Red Dog struggles to secure a job once he gains a criminal record, even though the conviction was due to a series of misunderstandings. Likewise, after another character, Milford, discovers his truck has been stolen, he tracks it down to a car dealership but is unable to retrieve it because the dealership has forged a bill of sale. Behind this scepticism about the written record on the part of *Green Grass, Running Water* stand the treaties that have been used by settler-invaders to deprive indigenous peoples of their rights and territories. Settler-invader governments' self-serving use of treaty documents—insisting on their authority but also flagrantly violating them when they prove inconvenient—lies behind the title of King's novel, which evokes phrasings in treaties

7 Catherine Rainwater, "Native American Literature: Cultural Foundations 1318," *St. Edwards University*, July 15, 2003. http://myweb.stedwards.edu/cathernr/CF18NALit.html.

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that promised the documents would be honored as long as the grass remained green and the rivers ran.

In class, it can be disconcerting for students when I suggest that the novel's scepticism about written texts connects treaties to classroom practices. Yet Hovaugh's fetishizing of his book stands as a caution against anyone thinking that answers to the world's problems are to be found in books alone, just as King's insistence on canonical texts' participation in colonial oppression warns us against unquestioningly embracing those texts. Elsewhere, *Green Grass, Running Water* further cautions against the fetishizing of literary study, as the narrative foregrounds characters' tendency to privilege written texts over meaningful engagements with those around them, as well as their tendency to treat the world as though it must accord with what is written down. That much is manifest in the novel's parody of *Moby-Dick*, as Ishmael insists to the indigenous figure Changing Woman that she be called Queequeg because the book in his possession implies that "this story is supposed to have a Queequeg in it."[8] In such moments, *Green Grass, Running Water* confirms Edward Said's observation: "It seems a common human failing to prefer the schematic authority of a text to the disorientations of direct encounters with the human."[9]

Teaching as Collaborative Storytelling

Ishmael's insistence that Changing Woman be called Queequeg suggests that stories can be dangerous when they take the form of unidirectional, pre-scripted impositions on their audiences. *Green Grass, Running Water* also suggests that such unidirectionality is equally dangerous when it comes to teaching. To draw students' attention to this concern on the part of the novel, I look with them at an early scene in which professor Alberta Frank is giving a lecture about Plains Indian ledger art, illustrations created by indigenous people incarcerated at Fort Marion in the nineteenth century. We discuss why King might wish to teach readers about this art, and we consider connections that the novel might be identifying between the art and *Green Grass, Running Water* itself in terms of their respective representations of indigenous lives. We also talk about what it means that *Green Grass, Running Water* teaches readers about the ledger art via the set piece of a university lecture, and we consider why the novel depicts that lecture as one in which the students are largely uninterested. One answer to this last question has to do with the characterization of the students: they all have names taken from figures in colonial history, thus suggesting that their disinterest is an ironic one, as their lives are more inextricable from that history than they seem to realize. In this irony, there is a further suggestion that the novel's readers, as actual or figurative fellow students, are likewise bound up with colonial history, at the very least insofar as they live in a society that has been profoundly shaped by colonization, even if they are not familiar with particular texts that colonization has informed. At the same time, *Green Grass, Running Water* is making a point about pedagogy. When I ask students in what ways Alberta's lecture seems to be a failure, they have no trouble judging it based on their notions of good and bad teaching. The problem, they say, is that for the most part, Alberta simply talks at her students and

8 King, *Green*, 195.
9 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London: Penguin, 1995), 93.

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shows them slides, even though she recognizes that one of them is asleep and others are distracted. Until she shifts to asking the students questions and soliciting theirs, she fails to connect with them; her lecture might as well be scripted.

The novel also models bad lecturing through the example of Lionel Red Dog, who, while working for the Department of Indian Affairs in 1973, agrees to give a paper on behalf of his supervisor at a conference in Salt Lake City on the topic of "Indian education." The conference ends up taking place during the American Indian Movement (AIM) occupation of Wounded Knee, South Dakota, and when Lionel arrives to read the paper in a three-piece suit, he finds that the audience is constituted largely by "Indians dressed in jeans and ribbon shifts." After Lionel simply launches into reading from behind a podium, an audience member cries out, "What does this crap have to do with our brothers and sisters at Wounded Knee?"[10] It does not help Lionel that his supervisor's paper—judging from its ironic title, "The History of Cultural Pluralism in Canada's Boarding Schools"—seems to be a defense of Canada's residential-school system, which separated indigenous children from their families in order to assimilate them into Euro-Canadian society. Lionel's mistake, it becomes clear, is to tell someone else's story unquestioningly while failing to account for his audience.

In contrast, *Green Grass, Running Water* privileges storytelling that is context-sensitive and collaborative. An early example of such storytelling involves the four elders, who have adopted the names Ishmael, Robinson Crusoe, Hawkeye, and the Lone Ranger. Their dialogue as they prepare to narrate a creation story is remarkable:

> "Okay," said the Lone Ranger, "is everybody ready?"
> "Hawkeye doesn't have a nice shirt," said Ishmael.
> "He can have one of mine," said Robinson Crusoe.
> "The red one?"
> "Yes."
> "The red one with the palm trees?"
> "Yes."
> "Don't forget the jacket," said Ishmael.
> "I won't."
> "You forgot it last time."
> "Did I?"
> "What about the light?" said Robinson Crusoe.
> "We'll turn it on later," said Ishmael.
> "And the apology?" said Hawkeye.
> "Coyote can do that," said the Lone Ranger. "Okay, are we ready now?"
> "Whose turn is it?" said Ishmael.[11]

In class, discussion of why *Green Grass, Running Water* includes this dialogue has led us to see the novel as modeling a form of storytelling that does not grant all

10 King, *Green*, 56.
11 Ibid., 9.

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authority to one teller; instead, the storytelling is communal, attentive to each participant's needs, and cognizant of the fact that mistakes can be made. In that regard, it is notable that the novel follows up this scene by introducing the contrastive figure of Hovaugh, who is solitary and inward-focused, and who repeatedly fails to honor the imperative uttered by indigenous figures in the novel: "Mind your relations."[12]

The structure and institutional requirements of a university lecture course with a large enrollment present significant challenges in terms of adopting the individualized, more collaborative method that the elders' storytelling exemplifies and that commentators have identified with indigenous approaches to education.[13] Universities usually expect instructors—and not students—to set syllabi, hold one-size-fits-all examinations, and assign grades. There are good reasons for such expectations, especially in large classes: not only do instructors have expertise that students lack, but when there are too many students for an instructor to become well acquainted with each one, it is virtually impossible to tailor the learning process to each one's abilities, needs, and interests. In my classes, however, I am able, at least, to discuss with students what Michael D. McNally has called "the structural disconnects between the conventions of the University classroom and Indigenous idioms of teaching and learning."[14] We are able to recognize that a top-down transfer of information in the lecture course has its merits: a good lecturer can present key ideas clearly and efficiently, model scholarly curiosity and critical thought, and inspire students with charisma and rhetorical flair. We also recognize that there are limits to the kinds of collaborative storytelling that can happen in the classroom when students lack important background knowledge. And I make it clear that it is important to avoid romanticizing indigenous practices or caricaturing indigenous pedagogy as a single set of practices that stand in polar opposition to university traditions. Discussions of the collaborative storytelling in *Green Grass, Running Water* have, however, helped us to denaturalize conventions of the lecture course and to see its limitations in terms of reckoning with students' varying needs.

Accepting what *Green Grass, Running Water* has to say about storytelling and considering it in terms of my teaching have also led me to make my lectures more discussion based than any lectures I attended when I was an undergraduate. In my classes, I aim for the conversation to be driven substantially by students' ideas and questions, bearing in mind the observation about storytelling made in King's novel by the indigenous elder Robinson Crusoe: "you can't tell it all by yourself."[15] In keeping with that assertion, I also frequently invite students to join me in reading passages of the novel aloud. Among other things, such shared reading offers a chance to speak in class for those students who might be shy about extemporizing. By reading aloud, they break the ice and are liable to feel more confident speaking out thereafter.

12 Ibid., 39.

13 For example, see Jeff Lambe, "Indigenous Education, Mainstream Education, and Native Studies," *American Indian Quarterly* 27.1–2 (2003): 308–24; and Michael D. McNally, "Indigenous Pedagogy in the Classroom: A Service Learning Model for Discussion," *American Indian Quarterly* 28.3–4 (2004): 604–17.

14 McNally, 609.

15 King, *Green*, 14.

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Recognizing the Limits of Expertise

A risk of teaching *Green Grass, Running Water* is that as one draws students' attention to the novel's dense thematic patterning, complicated narrative structure, and many allusions, one might come to stand in students' eyes as not just having attained a laudable expertise with regard to the text, demonstrating one's knowledge of it, but as asserting mastery over it, assuming a position of superiority and dominance while failing to reckon with one's limitations. It is this danger to which my student's comment about my teaching of the novel alerted me. The problems of asserting mastery are identified in *Green Grass, Running Water* through its presentation of unsympathetic characters who make such assertions. Ahdamn, Noah, and Hovaugh share with other unsympathetic characters in insisting on their authority, attempting to subordinate others, and never admitting to their own fallibility.[16] The novel encourages further scepticism about the drive toward mastery when it depicts an electronics store owner named Bill Bursum as having arranged a bank of TV sets in the shape of North America. Bursum says of the arrangement: "It was like having the universe there on the wall, being able to see everything, being in control." One of Bursum's employees pointedly observes, however, that Bursum shows only one movie on the sets.[17] In this observation, we can hear the novel behind the employee, recognizing that the pretense of mastery is premised on a harmful reductiveness.

In other ways, *Green Grass, Running Water* might seem to cultivate an impulse toward mastery. That is especially the case with respect to the novel's range of historical and cultural references. Virtually every character in the narrative has a name alluding to some historical or fictional personage, but many of the allusions go unexplained.[18] As Patricia Linton has pointed out, "most readers who take up the book will find themselves unable to comprehend it completely."[19] This wealth of allusions might seem like a challenge designed to stimulate a desire to master the text by identifying and deciphering them. Margery Fee and Jane Flick note: "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."[20]

The seemingly complacent ignorance of colonial history on the part of Alberta Frank's students is an early indicator in *Green Grass, Running Water* that King is keen for readers not to share such ignorance. The novel's allusions suggest a hope that readers will, instead, educate themselves into knowledge. However, the fact that the

16 For an extensive discussion of the novel's challenging of authority, see Sharon M. Bailey, "The Arbitrary Nature of the Story: Poking Fun at Oral and Written Authority in Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water*," *World Literature Today* 73.1 (1999): 43–52.

17 King, *Green*, 128, 127.

18 For a comprehensive, if by no means complete, guide to these allusions, see Jane Flick, "Reading Notes for Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water*," *Canadian Literature* 161/162 (1999): 140–72. Many of the figures alluded to in *Green Grass, Running Water* also receive mention in King's nonfiction book *The Inconvenient Indian: A Curious Account of Native People in North America* (Toronto, ON: Doubleday, 2012).

19 Patricia Linton, "'And Here's How It Happened': Trickster Discourse in Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 45.1 (1999), 215.

20 Margery Fee and Jane Flick, "Coyote Pedagogy: Knowing Where the Borders Are in Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water*," *Canadian Literature* 161/162 (1999): 131.

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novel presents figures such as Hovaugh and Bursum as problematic in their desire to know everything means that *Green Grass, Running Water* also cautions readers about the dangers of seeking a Godlike omniscience. When a character named Sergeant Cereno, who is investigating the four elders' disappearance and who is a racist and an impatient listener, announces that he wants to know "[e]verything," the novel is warning readers against aligning themselves with such a figure.[21] Later, in a scene involving the four elders, the Lone Ranger responds to Robinson Crusoe's question about how long they have to wait for a ride by saying, "Not long." Hawkeye asks the Lone Ranger, "Are you being omniscient again?" The Lone Ranger replies, "I think so."[22] The irony of these last words conspicuously suggests that omniscience is an imposture. Rather than satisfying a reader's desire to gain some semblance of omniscience regarding the intertextuality in King's novel, *Green Grass, Running Water* has affinities with what Doris Sommer calls "resistant literature": literature that characterizes "the scene of reading as a scene of more or less violent mastery" and that fosters a desire for mastery in readers only "in order to restrain or frustrate it."[23] By featuring a greater range and amount of intertextuality than any one reader could reasonably hope to master, King's novel insists that even while literature can function as transcultural communication, it should not be taken to render all difference visible, comprehensible, and assimilable.

Faced with the seemingly impossible challenge of tracking down every allusion in *Green Grass, Running Water*, undergraduate students may well look to their teachers for answers. Indeed, I have been tempted to devote much of my lectures on King's novel to explaining as many of its references as possible. My earliest lectures tended in this direction—thus, perhaps, prompting my student's impression that I had "taught the shit out of that book." Since then, to avoid suggesting that I have mastered the novel interpretively, I have aimed to stand self-reflexively outside the text with students. One way in which I do this is by compiling with the class a list of allusions that they recognize, thus enacting a cooperative model of knowledge-building. I also confess to students that I have come to identify various allusions in the novel through recourse to scholarly articles. And I point out that King himself nods to the fact that he has not produced his story alone: on the copyright page of *Green Grass, Running Water*, he acknowledges that the Cherokee calligraphy in the novel was contributed by someone else. You can't tell it all by yourself, indeed.

I do not dissuade students from aspiring to gain expertise as literary critics. *Green Grass, Running Water* cautions us, however, that the acquisition of expertise can foster delusions of superiority and entitlement beyond what is earned or ethical. Moreover, the novel reminds us early on that "[e]verybody makes mistakes," and it goes on to dramatize repeatedly the devastating effects that mistakes can have.[24] Through the novel's representation of the four elders, who attempt to "fix" stories that have been previously told—for instance, they supernaturally transform a key scene in a John Wayne movie so that the Indians, not the cowboys, win the final

21 King, *Green*, 24.
22 Ibid., 49.
23 Doris Sommer, "Resistant Texts and Incompetent Readers," *Poetics Today* 15.4 (1994), 529, 542.
24 King, *Green*, 8.

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battle—*Green Grass, Running Water* also emphasizes that people should aim to improve narratives by retelling them. In this respect, the elders are emblematic of the novel's own remedial interventions. In turn, those interventions provide a useful model for the teaching of literature—teaching that should, King's novel suggests, approach dominant myths and historiography sceptically without reinscribing textual hierarchies by insisting on yet another totalizing master narrative.

From Lessons to Problematics

At this point, I should address a seeming contradiction in my embrace of the novel's points. In adapting my teaching to align more closely with the novel's pedagogical principles, and in identifying these principles as confidently as I have, am I not reasserting my own interpretive mastery of it while simultaneously deferring excessively to its authority with regard to what constitutes good teaching?

I was led to ask these questions by another student's remark to me one day after class. When I asked what he thought of *Green Grass, Running Water*, he hesitated before replying with an air of disappointment, "What it says seems kind of obvious." As we talked further, it became clear that, in his eyes, what the novel "said" was what, in my lectures, I had declared it to say. This view concerned me for a couple of reasons. First, it made me realize that I had not been sufficiently self-reflexive about the provisionality and limited scope of my interpretations.[25] I did not want to appear as though I had offered the last word about the novel. Second, I apprehended that I had spent too much time in class discussing aspects of *Green Grass, Running Water* about which there exists an approving critical consensus, while I had neglected aspects that were liable to spark disagreement. In the wake of my exchange with the student, I have increasingly moved toward, instead, facilitating class discussion of the novel's problematics: things about which the text does not provide clear answers and about which I do not have clear answers, either.

One of these problematics is the matter of how the novel portrays interpersonal relationships between indigenous and white characters. The matter's importance was drawn to my attention by yet another student. In order to provide the class with varying opportunities for participation, each year I give out blank cue cards at the end of the penultimate lecture on *Green Grass, Running Water*, asking students each to write down a question—anonymously, if they like—about some element of the novel that they would like addressed in the final class. I then spend much of the final lecture sharing their questions for discussion. Students are, thus, able to shape the direction of inquiry and to ask questions without fear of embarrassment. One such question a few years ago was: "Isn't there scepticism in the novel about 'interracial' relationships?" I thought the question astute. As *Green Grass, Running Water* depicts relationships, romantic or otherwise, between white and indigenous characters, those relationships almost inevitably involve rehearsals of colonial racism and power dynamics,

25 Such self-reflexivity is admirably modeled by Helen Hoy in her book *How Should I Read These?: Native Women Writers in Canada* (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2001). Hoy writes: "Rather than proposing conclusions, I am tracing a process, rehearsing areas of contention, proffering analysis that is then often itself challenged, modified, or displaced, and ending with partial and provisional answers that invite further challenge" (25).

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sometimes explicitly, sometimes subtly. That rehearsal is forefront in the relationship between Latisha, who is Blackfoot, and her ex-husband, who is white, abusive, and clearly racist. Even the loving relationship between another Blackfoot character, Eli Stands Alone, and his spouse, a white woman named Karen, is shaded by Karen's exoticizing of Eli, such as when she playfully calls him her "Mystic Warrior." Karen likewise exoticizes the Sun Dance when Eli takes her to it, remarking that her attendance is "like going back in time."[26] Considering these elements of the novel, students in my classes have pointed out that Karen and Eli's example has implications for non-indigenous people in the classroom. There is a danger, the novel warns, of those people fetishizing and subordinating indigenous peoples in the very attempt to learn about them. As Sommer puts it, "the will to understand the Other" can be "appropriation in the guise of an embrace."[27]

Meanwhile, one unambiguously positive "interracial" relationship in *Green Grass, Running Water* is between Changing Woman and Moby-Jane, a whale who is identified as a black lesbian.[28] Although this parody of *Moby-Dick* is slyly subversive of the racial and homoerotic dynamics in Herman Melville's novel, the relationship between Changing Woman and Moby-Jane is only briefly, elliptically portrayed. What are we to make of that representation? Some students have suggested that it is pointed, meant to underscore how society has long marginalized same-sex and "interracial" relationships. Other students have taken the portrayal to indicate a limitation in the novel; they see a failure of ideological nerve in the text's refusal to grant the relationship a more central place in the plot. Yet other students have considered it significant that neither Changing Woman nor Moby-Jane is white, and they have taken this fact to indicate that the novel is pessimistic about the possibility of fully decolonized relationships between white and indigenous people, either individually or collectively. All three perspectives on this aspect of *Green Grass, Running Water*—along with other possible views of it—are worth discussing in class.

The matter of "interracial" relationships is just one problematic in *Green Grass, Running Water*. Looking back on my early teaching of the novel, I have realized that I generally steered clear of such thorny matters. I did so because I wanted to help students appreciate the many rich points of scholarly consensus about the text. Also, I was hesitant to broach difficult subjects for which I did not have answers and about which there might be serious disagreement. Now, I see those subjects as ones that particularly need addressing. To be sure, it is important to recognize points of critical accord, but it is also crucial to discuss elements of a text that are unsettled and unsettling; the classroom needs to be a space where difficult conversations can happen sensitively, safely, and productively. In that regard, one of my principal roles in the classroom is to model not authority but curiosity and care in talking about texts, with the hope that the conversations I foster will enrich students' view both of literature and of the world in which literature participates. Here, I agree with Paulo Freire, who suggests that rather than providing students with prepackaged narratives, teachers must engage in "problem-posing education": education that treats reality itself not as

26 King, *Green*, 164, 203.
27 Sommer, 543.
28 King, *Green*, 196.

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neatly totalized—"motionless, static, compartmentalized, and predictable"—but as "unfinished."[29] In this respect, Freire shares with *Green Grass, Running Water* in emphasizing that the stories we tell do not merely describe the world but also shape and reshape it.

Against Totalization

A focus on the problematics of *Green Grass, Running Water*, not just on its lessons, accords with one more pedagogical principle that the novel suggests: namely, that one should avoid straining toward artificial closure. *Green Grass, Running Water* itself refuses to end neatly; instead, it concludes with the narrator saying "And here's how it happened," thus signaling an intention to start telling yet another creation story.[30] Moreover, insofar as the novel is a fictional narrative, not a history lesson or a sermon, the exact nature of its "lessons" is up to readers to decide, not something intrinsic to the text. In that regard, the novel accords with Lee Maracle's characterization of indigenous pedagogy. Maracle asserts: "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."[31]

To avoid the appearance of presenting a totalizing narrative about *Green Grass, Running Water*, I finish lecturing on the book by pointing to aspects of it that we have not had time to take up with as much depth as we might, confirming Andrew Wiget's obversation that "[t]o open a discussion of *any* single Native American text is to immediately invoke in one's students and one's self a tangled web of issues that will never become fully sorted out in the limited time available in the classroom."[32] At the same time, I signal to students that various issues raised by King's novel will recur throughout the course. For instance, regardless of whether each text we consider thereafter is by an indigenous author, we repeatedly take up *Green Grass, Running Water*'s imperative to consider literature in relation to colonialism. We aim, as Len Findlay has put it, to "always indigenize": that is, to appreciate that "there is no *hors-Indigène*, no geopolitical or psychic setting, no real or imagined *terra nullius* free from the satisfactions and unsettlements of Indigenous (pre)occupation."[33] As we do so, I suggest to students that we think of the course not as providing a totalizing map in the manner of Bill Bursum's television sets but as drawing attention to and participating in certain stories and conversations: stories and conversations that have recurred in different contexts between different participants at various points in

29 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Continuum, 1984), 72, 80.

30 King, *Green*, 431.

31 Quoted in Fee and Flick, 138.

32 Quoted in Carol Zitzer-Comfort, "Teaching Native American Literature: Inviting Students to See the World through Indigenous Lenses," *Pedagogy* 8.1 (2008), 160.

33 Len Findlay, "Always Indigenize!: The Radical Humanities in the Postcolonial Canadian University," *Unhomely States: Theorizing English-Canadian Postcolonialism*, ed. Cynthia Sugars (Orchard Park, NY: Broadview, 2004), 368.

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literary history; stories and conversations that have often excluded, silenced, and harmed people and peoples; stories and conversations that have frequently rehearsed the sorts of hierarchical relations and drives toward mastery that *Green Grass, Running Water* urges us to recognize and to resist.[34]

34 This article is dedicated to Rosemary Jolly. It was while taking her course "The Bible and Literature" as an undergraduate student at Queen's University that I first read *Green Grass, Running Water*, and her teaching of the novel continues to influence my own.

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