Re-Creation in Canadian First Nations Literatures: "When You Sing It Now, Just Like New"

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Abstract: Canadian First Nations literatures include both traditional oral performative genres and written texts. This paper reviews First Nations poetics as represented in oratory, fictional literature, presentations to Canadian courts and the visual arts. It concludes that contemporary expressive forms recreate those embedded in oral tradition. The paper cites examples from both oral and written sources. It concludes that a First Nations narrative technology continues to energize contemporary literary and expressive genres.

Résumé: Les littératures canadiennes des Premières Nations comprennent à la fois des genres de performance orale et des textes écrits. Cet article passe en revue des oeuvres poétiques des Premières Nations, qu'elles appartiennent au domaine oratoire, à la littérature de fiction, aux plaidoyers devant les cours canadiennes ou aux arts visuels. Il conclut que les formes d'expression contemporaines recréent celles qui s'exprimaient dans la tradition orale. L'article donne des exemples tirés de la tradition orale et de sources écrites. Il conclut qu'une forme narrative des Premières Nations continue à nourrir les genres contemporains d'expression artistique.

Introduction

"When you sing it now, just like new," said Tommy Attachie of Dane-zaa songs and stories. It was the summer of 1998 and Tommy and I were cataloguing material for a CD of songs and oratory by the Dreamer Charlie Yahey. Tommy is a Dane-zaa elder and song-keeper. He told me that:

> All these songs, how many years ago.
> Makenunatane yine [songs of the dreamer, Makenunatane],
> and Aledze, Maketchueson, Nachan [names of other dreamers].
> How many years ago. Old prophet.
> When you sing it now, just like new.

Each rendition of a song from the Dreamer's tradition evokes the stories of a particular Dreamer's life and teaching. When you sing the songs of the old prophets, the stories become "just like new." To use a distinction made by Dennis Tedlock (1991: 315), they are recreations rather than reproductions. Stories in Zuni oral narrative, he said (and then wrote), are interpretive performances:

> They exist only in the form of interpretations
> and it takes a multiplicity of voices to tell them.
> (Tedlock, 1991:338)

Like song, Dane-zaa oral narrative is a performance genre. In performance, Dane-zaa singers and storytellers recreate rather than reproduce material from their cultural tradition.

Stories from First Nations oral tradition are interpretive rather than canonical. They live in the communal space shared by storyteller and listener. They live when a knowledgeable storyteller gives them voice for a particular audience. They live in a succession of creations and re-creations. They live in the breath of their tellers.

Storytellers have kept their oral traditions alive by "singing them now," and by so doing, making them "just like new." Each telling is an interpretive re-creation rather than a recitation. Each telling realizes a shared creative authority.

Storytellers now cross the borders that separate oral and written literatures (Fee and Flick, 1999). Stories in both media contextualize information by reference to shared experience. Authors and readers of First Nations literature similarly participate in dialogue by sharing experience. Communicating by crossing between orality and literacy is Indian business. First Nations writers like Thomas King and Tomson Highway vigorously exercise a sort of intellectual corollary of the Jay treaty, easily transgressing the boundaries that separate orality and literacy while remaining at home within their own country.

In this paper I discuss how contemporary Canadian First Nations writers, orators and artists continue to recreate their narrative traditions using the wide variety of settings and media now available to them. I suggest that narrative traditions continue to be instrumental to First Nations adaptive technology. First Nations people communicate their understanding of the world in the languages of narrative, ceremony, visual representation, dialogue and oral tradition. I engage with First Nations literature in a variety of voices and media. Anthropologists have debated, nearly to the point of exhaustion, whether postmodern literary theory has anything to say to us, but have paid less attention to literature itself as ethnography. I suggest that we should be sharing theoretical as well as ethnographic authority with First Nations traditions by conversing with their narratives and narrators, rather than with the obfuscating and literarily barren language of postmodern theory (Ridington, 1999a).

First Nations Narrative Technology

First Nations literature is, I suggest, part of a long tradition of what I have elsewhere called "narrative technology" (Ridington, 1999b). Literature is more than a pastime in First Nations tradition. It is where stories become experience and experience gives rise to stories. In the pages that follow I present examples of First Nations oral and written literatures, some of which go beyond the conventional definitions of literature as intentionally written composition. As I suggest throughout the paper, a reading of First Nations literature must necessarily expand and transgress the boundaries that conventionally separate ethnography and literature.

Although all technology may be viewed as being knowledge-based, the techniques with which First Nations people have always related to one another and to their environment are particularly dependent on knowledge held by individuals. Knowledge passes from one person to another and from generation to generation through discourse and oral tradition. Both men and women in First Nations cultures maintain intimate physical and interpersonal relations with the animal people and personified natural features of their environment. Humans and animals are principal characters in stories that define their relations to one another. Their material world is also a storied world (Cruikshank, 1990; 1998). Communication within a matrix of social relations that includes relations with animal people is central to the forces of production in a traditional aboriginal economy. Communication within a circle of "all my relations" continues to sustain First Nations storytellers in an economy that includes pizza and microwave ovens and computers.

The stories of Okanagan elder Harry Robinson, as told to and transcribed by Wendy Wickwire, demonstrate the range of experiences and narratives possible within an oral tradition. Robinson's work is particularly important because it does not rely on translation at the level of the text. That is, he integrates translation and performance by telling his stories in English. In one story, Robinson describes the vision quest among his people as a form of discourse between people, animals and what we would call inanimate objects:

> You got to have power. You got to, the kids, you know. They got to meet the animal, you know, when they was little. Can be anytime till it's five years old to ten years old. He's supposed to meet animal or bird, or anything, you know. And this animal, whoever they meet, got to talk to 'em and tell 'em what they should do. Later on, not right away. And that is his power. (Robinson, 1992: 10)

One of the stories in Robinson's *Nature Power* illustrates his point. It tells about hunters taking a boy to an avalanche-strewn gully to obtain power from a stump that had survived there for centuries. After the hunters left, the boy encountered a chipmunk living under the stump. The chipmunk spoke to him as a boy like him:

> You my friend.
> You boy, and I'm a boy.
> We both boy.
> So, it's better to be friends
>   instead of making fun out of me.
> Now, I'm going to tell you something.
> This stump—you think it's a stump—
>   but that's my grandfather.
> He's a very, very old man.

Old, old man.
He can talk to you.
He can tell you what you going to be.
When you get to be middle-aged or more. (Robinson, 1992: 29)

The boy then saw the stump as an old man, who tells him that his power will be to ward off bullets, just as the stump has resisted avalanche stones. The power becomes part of the boy's identity through the agency of a shared song:

And he started to sing.
He sing the song.
That old man.
And the chipmunk was a boy,
turn out to be a boy.
He sing the song.
The both of 'em talked to him.
And he sing the song.
The three of 'em sing the song
for a while. (Robinson, 1992: 30)

This story illustrates the dialogic nature of First Nations narrative technology. The boy obtains power through conversation and song. When he joins the old man and the chipmunk in singing the song, the old man's power becomes "just like new." Harry's stories are not limited to "traditional" experiences such as vision quest empowerment. In his version of the creation story, for instance, Harry describes how the creator instructs Chinese and whites as well as Indians by presenting them with written documents. He tells the Chinese person:

And this paper, you take this paper.
You have 'em in your hand.
Then I throw you.
Wherever you landed, that's yours.
Then you open up the paper
and that'll tell you what you going to do
from the time you landed in there
till the end of the world.
It'll tell you what you going to do.
And you got to follow that.
That's in my thought.
I want 'em to be that way. (Robinson, 1989: 41)

Because his world includes writing and people from foreign lands, Harry's narrative includes, explains and connects them to Indian experience. Each story may be understood in its own right, but each story also contains reference to every other. First Nations narrators have always archived information about human and non-human persons through multiply linked stories and shared experiences. Their system of information is analogous to the web of linked information available electronically on the world wide web (despite the obvious differences in means of accessing information), in that stories, motifs or characters are multiply linked to one another. Stories are stored in a way that resembles the distribution of visual information in a holographic image. Each part both connects to other parts and retains an image of the whole. Parts of stories are still stories. Stories remain meaningful even in small segments. Each story suggests every other story. Each one bears a metonymic relationship to an entire corpus. In the technology of storied experience, the events of a person's life suggest connections to the voices and actions of both human and non-human persons. Individual storied experience is a meaningful part of an entire storied world. When the experience of First Nations people includes a full range of contemporary situations, their narratives reflect these accordingly. It made perfect sense for Harry's narratives to include both power songs and written texts.

Because First Nations people have always brought their world into being through dialogue with each other, and with a variety of other human and non-human persons, their narrative traditions have entered the contemporary world through a variety of media. First Nations people continue to use the modes of discourse that are familiar to them, even as they take part in the affairs of nation states. They still converse with one another, and with outsiders, through the discourse of oral narrative, conversation and oratory. In addition to using these traditional media, they also speak and write about land claims cases, communicate as teachers, create visual art and write fiction, non-fiction and poetry. First Nations oral and written literatures enact modes of discourse based on shared experience and mutual understanding. First Nations literature now exists in and about a variety of contemporary contexts.

Narrative Tradition, Contemporary Media, and the Pizza Test

Oral tradition has it that in a case involving the demonstration of aboriginal rights by a First Nations group, lawyers for the Crown asked a plaintiff about what foods she ate: fish, moosemeat, berries, grease—"Yes." Then came the clincher. What about pizza? "Well, yes, I eat pizza sometimes." Voilà! The lawyer argued that she could no longer claim aboriginal rights because pizza is not an authentic aboriginal dish. This argument has

entered a folklore shared by participants in land claims issues as "the pizza test." The Canadian government applied the same principle with an even heavier hand when, for a time in the nineteenth century, it automatically removed Indian status from any aboriginal person who received a university degree, on the grounds that "educated" and "enfranchised" Indians were no longer real, i.e., primitive Indians.

More recently, British Columbia Supreme Court Chief Justice Allan McEachern wrote in his Delgamuukw decision (McEachern, 1991) that while the Gitksan and Witsuwit'en plaintiffs were aboriginally, "a primitive people without any form of writing, horses, or wheeled wagons," (25) "witness after witness admitted participation in the wage or cash economy" (56). For McEachern, such participation negated the plaintiffs' claims "for ownership and jurisdiction over the territory and for aboriginal rights in the territory" (297). In his eyes, the plaintiffs had failed the pizza test.

Mode of Thought—Mode of Discourse

The narrative traditions of First Nations people do not come to an end with the first taste of pizza. Instead, storytellers are quick to incorporate new experiences into their storied world. In my work with the Dane-zaa, I was initially puzzled by a story about choices made by the first people on earth that included a reference to cartridge belts (Ridington, 1999a: 178). When I asked the translator what word the narrator had used, she told me it was atu-ze, literally "belonging to arrows." Rather than fixing Dane-zaa identity by reference to discontinued items of material culture, the narrator and translator told the story with reference to contemporary experience. The story was about how people continue to use tools and a knowledge of the environment in making a living, not about defining Dane-zaa hunters as users of bows and arrows.

Aboriginal people who eat pizza (or those who have law degrees or teach in universities or write novels or practise in the visual or dramatic arts) remain authentically Indian. Pizza and writing do not forever remove them from what Walter Ong (1982: 78) called "pristine or primary orality." Rather than having had their consciousness restructured (Ong's term) by literacy, First Nations writers have used their orality to restructure the conventions of western literature. They continue to use aboriginal modes of discourse and narrative technologies as they negotiate relations within the larger society. They continue to live by the dialogue through which they negotiate relations with one another and with other persons in the world surrounding them.

Narrative Technology and the Law

Because the adaptive strategies of First Nations people continue to be embedded in dialogue, narrative and mutually shared experience, their literatures continue to serve contemporary members of First Nations communities. In addition to the continuing practice of narrative discourse within the confines of face-to-face communities, First Nations people participate in a number of performance genres through which they seek to negotiate relations with the nation-states within which they find themselves. Some of these have involved presenting themselves in courts of law. A classic case of representation and negotiation occurred in the aforementioned Delgamuukw case. Hereditary chiefs of the Gitksan and Witsuwit'en First Nations of northwestern British Columbia brought a court action against the provincial and federal governments to establish aboriginal title to their traditional lands. In his opening statement, Chief Delgamuukw told the court that:

> For us, the ownership of territory is a marriage of the Chief and the land. Each Chief has an ancestor who encountered and acknowledged the life of the land. From such encounters come power. The land, the plants, the animals and the people all have spirit - they must be shown respect. That is the basis of our law. (Gisda Wa and Delgam Uukw, 1989: 7)

The chiefs went on to explain that oral traditions (ada'ox for the Gitksan, kungax for the Witsuwit'en) are empowering stories that constitute title to traditional territories. The Witsuwit'en described their kungax as a "trail of song" that links "the land, the animals, the spirit world and the people" (Gisda Wa and Delgam Uukw 1989: 30). The testimony that Delgamuukw [the spelling now in most common usage] and other First Nations witnesses gave before the court was a challenge to the language and premises of western law. It asked the judge to consider the validity of alternative legal principles. In his trial judgment, Mr. Justice Allan McEachern limited his definition of aboriginal rights "to the use of the lands in the manner they say their ancestors used them" (McEachern, 1991: 15). He implied that contemporary First Nations experience is not authentically aboriginal.

The plaintiffs appealed McEachern's trial judgment, and the Supreme Court of Canada overturned his rulings on the validity of oral tradition. Before that happened, though, members of the plaintiff communities had an opportunity to express themselves in a conference organized to review the implications of the case. One of the participants was Witsuwit'en chief Wigetimstochol (Dan

Michel), who spoke in a way that embodied the genre conventions of First Nations oratory. He told conference participants of the lessons he teaches his grandchildren when he takes them out hunting:

> God created us to be what we are, an Indian. We belong to these lands. It would be like those animals—there's a horse and a cow, and it's impossible for a horse to try and be a cow. That's how it is if we're going to try and be a white man. We're not created to be a white man. (Cassidy, 1992: 62)

Michel went on to describe the importance of what his grandfather taught him about the land and its animals:

> I met up with the grizzly bear about six or seven years ago. It just came back to me what my grandfather said about this great animal. He said, "When he is coming at you, don't get nervous or excited. Just face him. He wouldn't run over you." I remembered that, and as soon as I remembered those words, I was so calm. I wasn't even nervous. I had my gun ready and trained on him. I let him come just as close as these first row of seats. That's when he stopped. (Cassidy, 1994: 64)

He followed this story with another about encountering a grizzly bear with some officials from the Department of Fisheries and Oceans.

> I said, "Have you ever seen a grizzly bear go fishing?" They said, "No." "Well, again, it was given to him by the Creator. That grizzly bear has got his right to go fishing the way he was supposed to do. Nobody tells him how to fish. If you see a grizzly bear out fishing, do you give the grizzly bear a permit to go fishing?" They said, "No." "So therefore you don't need to give me a permit. I go fishing when I need to go fishing." (Cassidy, 1994: 65)

Dan Michel's story applied the teaching of his grandfather to his relations with government officials. The story uses metaphor to demonstrate that his relationship with the grizzly stands for the overall relationship of his people to their ancestral lands. His story articulated fundamental principles of Witsuwit'en law. Fisheries officers are not part of aboriginal Witsuwit'en culture. They are new, but unlike pizza and cartridge belts, they threaten to override that culture rather than enhance it. In his narrative, Chief Wigetimstochol applied traditional law to a contemporary situation. The Witsuwit'en identify their law as yinkadinii'ha ba aten, "the ways of the people on the surface of the earth" or as deni biits wa aden, "the way the feast works" (Mills, 1994: 141). According to Mills, "The principles of Witsuwit'en law define both how the people own and use the surface of the earth when they are dispersed on the territories and how they govern themselves and settle disputes when they are gathered together in the feast" (1994: 141). She quotes Chief Samooh (Moses David) as saying:

> Kus (eagle down) is like a peace bond. This is the way our law was passed on by our forefathers and grandfathers. This is the way we should be living today, each one of us, instead of following the White man's law. (Mills, 1994: 141)

Chief Wigetimstochol's beautifully crafted oral performance used a traditional narrative form to apply the law Chief Samooh described to a very contemporary situation. Rather than being obsolete and archaic, Gitksan and Witsuwit'en narrative technologies continue to provide an appropriate means of dealing with current legal and political disputes. Their literatures continue to enact relations of power.

Narrative Technology, Pizza and Contemporary Performance Genres

First Nations oral narratives are dialogic and in their genre conventions and therefore novelistic. They use metaphors that relate to shared experience and mutual understanding. They often include dialogue embedded within a third person's narrative. Sometimes they even become theatrical when the narrator forsakes his or her own voice to present dialogic quotes in the voices of other characters. Episodic interrelated vignettes performed by a knowledgeable narrator are typical of First Nations oral literatures. Each story builds upon every other in a network of interconnection. Each telling of a particular episode allows the listener to recreate it and the entirety of which it is a part. He or she puts the pieces together in a way that is similar to the process by which the reader of a written text becomes an author of his or her particular reading. The story has its being as a conversation between narrator and listener. As Tommy Attachie told me, "When you sing it now, just like new."

According to Bakhtin, the novel is a living form of expression. He writes, "Life by its very nature is dialogic. To live means to participate in dialogue" (1984: 293). The act of reading brings a written text into the conversation of a person's life. It is not surprising that a number of First Nations writers have chosen to express themselves in the dialogic genres of novels, short stories, poetry, and drama. Like works in the oral tradition, First Nations written literatures are full of references to mutually shared experiences that enable the reader-lis-

tener to be comfortable as critic, interpreter and even author. These literatures make sense because of their dialogic relationship to the lives and experiences of their listeners and readers. "When you sing it now, just like new."

In her recent thesis on "Storied Voices in First Nations Texts," Blanca Chester argues that First Nations writers give new and revitalized tellings of old stories by adapting familiar narrative strategies to new situations. "Every act of representation," she writes, "also tells us another version of an old story, the interpretation itself becoming a part of the narrative in its new context" (Chester, 1999a: 232). In contrast to Walter Ong, who argues a sort of literary version of the pizza test (writing restructures consciousness and obliterates pristine orality) Chester suggests that First Nations writers "construct dialogic interactions between readers and written texts that resemble the interactions between storytellers and audiences." Thus, she writes, "The reader is part of the story of each novel; the story is an old story" (238).

Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water* is particularly close to the genre conventions of First Nations oral literature in its use of voice and dialogue. It tells old stories in new settings. It tells stories from the western tradition as part of First Nations literature. King gives full credit for the voice he uses in his novel to Harry Robinson (Gzowski, 1993). His work presents a strong case against the pizza test of aboriginal authenticity. King himself is of Greek and Cherokee descent, and his work is informed as well by the time he spent listening to Indian stories when he was director of the First Nations Studies department at the University of Lethbridge. The novel is, among other things, King's reading of North American literature, literary theory, First Nations history, and popular culture through the images and genre conventions of American Indian oral tradition. King's characters include Blackfeet university professors and four old Indians named The Lone Ranger, Ishmael, Robinson Crusoe and Hawkeye who turn out, the reader discovers, to be First Woman, Changing Woman, Thought Woman and Old Woman in disguise. Written as a collage of episodes in which each story contains something of every other story, the novel is held together by the narrative voice of Coyote acting as contrary, trickster and even God.

In a paper called "Theorizing Coyote's Cannon: Sharing Stories with Thomas King," I suggested that, "If academic theorizing is usually a product of argument and monologue, First Nations theorizing would have to be the product of conversation and dialogue" (1999a: 19). King uses the novel to demolish literary critic Northrop Frye's monologic and Euro-centric structural theory. Dr. J. Hovaugh, "whom King models on Northrop Frye" (Chester, 1999b: 49), is the head doctor in a mental institution for old Indians. First Nations theorizing, I wrote, "sounds different from that of non-Native Americanists. Its vocabulary and genre conventions are those of oral narrative, ceremony and visual representation" (1999a: 22). When the name is spoken out loud, King's J. Hovaugh transforms into Jehovah. King portrays Frye, who described the Bible as The Great Code, as playing God. His reliance on monologic authority prevents him from entering into conversation with First Nations reality. In contrast to Frye's image of Canadian identity as a "garrison mentality," with hostile and incomprehensible savages lurking in the wilderness, King and other First Nations writers centre their narratives in a richly storied homeland where new experiences (like pizza) simply create new stories.

One of the characters in King's latest novel, *Truth and Bright Water*, is a "big time Indian artist" named Monroe Swimmer. The name itself refers to King's Cherokee heritage and, more subtly, to his assertion that Indians can own both orality and literacy. Swimmer was a Cherokee healer who in 1887 showed anthropologist James Mooney a book of sacred formulas written in the syllabary devised by Sequoyah (also known as George Guess) in 1821. Swimmer told Mooney that performing the sacred formulas made it possible for desired events to take place in the physical world. Hunters, he said, paid as much as $5 for a single song, "because you can't kill any bears or deer unless you sing them" (Mooney, 1891: 311).

United States President James Monroe was the author of a policy of removing Indians to "Indian Territory" west of the Mississippi. Cherokees were particularly hard hit by the removal and refer to their experience as "the trail of tears." In *Truth and Bright Water*, Cherokees from Georgia arrive at a Blackfeet reservation during "Indian Days." They are still on their way to Oklahoma ("the long way around"), and stay at the Happy Trails Trailer Park. The name is, of course, an inversion of the "Trail of Tears." The visitors include George Guess, John Ross and Rebecca Neugin, all of whom are real characters in the history of Cherokee removal (King, 1999: 102).

In King's novel, Monroe Swimmer the artist activates the stories of both his names to reverse the painful history of Cherokee removal from their homeland. He returns to Truth and Bright Water, buys an old church, and proceeds to paint it into the landscape, starting with the east-facing wall. Like the images used in the Paiute prophet Wovoka's Ghost Dance (also documented by

James Mooney), Swimmer's painting literally removes the colonial past from the perceptual environment. Also like Wovoka, Swimmer places images of buffalo back on the land, where they come alive and begin to move out onto the prairie. Monroe Swimmer is a "big Indian artist" and a trickster, who reverses the history of Indian removals. By a clever shift of syntax, Swimmer transforms Indians from the subject of removals into agents of their own re-creation. As Wovoka prophesied, the church of the whitemen does disappear. The buffalo do return. In King's novels, Indians recover their history. They remember Monroe and Swimmer. They remember the buffalo who died and the skulls of children sequestered in museums. They remember and, through narrative, they restore these physical remains as cultural and physical presence.

Swimmer is also an agent of repatriation. He recovers the bones of Indians held in museums and returns them to a river called "the Shield." In Plains Indian tradition, shields are painted with medicine signs that realize the owner's empowering visionary experiences. Swimmer knows the efficacy of sacred formulas. He knows that Truth and Bright Water are a single country; Indian country. He would agree with Tommy Attachie that, "When you sing it now, just like new." Once again, King tells an old story in a new setting.

There's lots more going on in *Truth and Bright Water*. The book is narrated in the present tense by a 15-year-old boy whose name turns out to be Tecumseh, thus referencing another history of Indian removal and resistance. The narrator's cousin is a runner who represents the Apache war shaman, Geronimo. The names of Truth and Bright Water resonate with the town of Truth or Consequences, New Mexico, formerly known as Geronimo Springs before it was appropriated by a television game show. Other resonances include a brave dog named Soldier who plays the role of Plains Indian Dog Soldier, pledged to defend all his relations to the death. There are "the Cousins," half-wild dogs originally brought by missionaries "to keep the Indians in line" (38), who watch over events like a Greek chorus as the drama unfolds. The book abounds with references to King's friends and colleagues. These are literally "all my relations," the phrase that contemporary Plains Indians use to enter or exit ceremonial spaces, and also the title of a collection King edited.

King currently writes and performs with two Cree actors in a weekly 15-minute radio show on the CBC radio network, ironically called "The Dead Dog Cafe Comedy Hour." Like his novels, the show uses a contemporary comedic medium to convey serious messages about the enduring qualities of aboriginal experience and narrative tradition. It offers biting social commentary from a First Nations perspective. King has also produced a series of ironic portraits of First Nations artists wearing Lone Ranger masks. In King's version of the Lone Ranger story, the "masked man" is masked in order to conceal that he is actually an Indian (King, 2000). The truth of a story, King says, lies in its pattern of relationships rather than in the events of a particular telling. In a paper entitled "How I Spent My Summer Vacation," King presents multiple versions of a story he may or may not have heard from a woman named Bella at the Blackfeet Sun Dance. His narrative is an example of the recursive epistemology he describes, in that the story is itself a retelling of Canadian author W.O. Mitchell's classic novella, *Summer Vacation*, whose narrator tells the same story in multiple versions. In King's version of the Mitchell/Bella story, he comments that academic historians,

> like our history to be authentic. We like our facts to be truthful. We are suspicious of ambiguity, uneasy with metaphor. We are not concerned with essential relationships. We want cultural guarantees, solid currencies that we can take to the bank. (King, 1998: 248)

Bella, by contrast, "believes that history and story are the same. She sees no boundaries, no borders, between what she knows and what she can imagine. Everything is story, and all the stories are true" (King, 250). Bella's view reflects that of the reader/author in the following exchange between Coyote and the authorial "I," in *Green Grass, Running Water*:

> "I got back as soon as I could," says Coyote. "I was busy being a hero."
> That's unlikely," I says.
> "No, no," says Coyote. "It's the truth."
> "There are no truths, Coyote," I says. "Only stories."
> "Okay," says Coyote, "Tell me a story." (King, 1993: 326)

The truth is in the story, as well as in its parts and particulars, which are also stories. Transformations are possible and indeed necessary. George Guess, who "reads books," (King, 1999: 102) shows up at the Happy Trails Trailer Park. Archetypal creation goddesses become four old Indians with names from English literature. Atu-ze become cartridge belts. Ownership of territory becomes a marriage of the chief and the land. Witsuwit'en law defines how the people own and use the surface of the earth. Indians become professors of English literature. Indians eat pizza and put on a radio

show from the Dead Dog Cafe. Indian writers continue to work within an oral tradition.

Humour and irony are highly developed in the work of contemporary Canadian First Nations visual artists, such as Carl Beam, Bill Powless, Gerald McMaster, Shelly Niro, Lawrence Paul and Jane Ash Poitras. Some of their work is textual as well as visual. It embodies what Allan J. Ryan, quoting Carl Beam, calls "the trickster shift" (Ryan, 1999). A typical work is McMaster's ironic painting entitled, "Shaman explaining the theory of transformation to cowboys." The image is of four impressionistic cowboys in silhouette facing an abstract horned skull. The title, written across the bottom of the painting, sets the viewer's mind in motion as much as the image itself. Indian theory is embedded in narrative performance. Like King, McMaster plays transformative games with the popular stereotype of cowboys and Indians. He says of this painting:

> What I did there was to show the incongruity. The life of a cowboy is generally quite profane. Cowboys sit around the campfire and sing songs. The notion of intellectual conversation and bantering isn't really there. It's fairly simple. On the other hand, scholars and Native peoples and so many others have tried to understand what a shaman is and nobody can. We get an idea of what he does and who he is. It's so complex a field—to begin to understand what a Native person is as represented by the shaman. (Ryan, 1999: 33)

A passionate and articulate proponent of First Nations discourse is Jeannette C. Armstrong, a novelist, poet and director of the En'owkin International School of Writing in Penticton, British Columbia. As a native speaker of her Okanagan language, Armstrong has tried to achieve an English prose form that does justice to the thought patterns and imagery inherent in Okanagan. "Times, places, and things," she writes, "are all made into movement, surrounding you and connected to you like the waves of a liquid stretching outward" (Armstrong, 1998: 190). In her novel, *Slash*, she consciously uses English syntax and vocabulary to evoke the Okanagan sense of movement.

Armstrong suggests that even, "Okanagan Rez English has a structural quality syntactically and semantically closer [than standard English] to the way the Okanagan language is arranged" (1998: 193). The Okanagan stories that Harry Robinson told in English to Wendy Wickwire illustrate this point (Robinson 1989; 1992), as does the Robinson influenced dialogue in Thomas King's work. Armstrong writes that Okanagan reality (like that of other First Nations):

> ... is very much like a story: it is easily changeable and transformative with each speaker. Reality in that way becomes very potent with animation and life. It is experienced as an always malleable reality within which you are like an attendant at a vast symphony surrounding you, a symphony in which, at times, you are the conductor. (Armstrong, 1988: 191)

In Okanagan storytelling, she goes on to say:

> ... the ability to move the audience back and forth between the present reality and the story reality relies heavily on the fluidity of time sense that the language offers. (Ibid.: 194)

This distinctively aboriginal quality of moving the audience back and forth between present and storied reality helps explain the transformations and trickster shifts of storytellers from Robinson to King. Every story does contain every other. Swimmer, Tecumseh, Geronimo and Sequoyah can meet at the Happy Trails Trailer Park for "Indian Days." Coyote and pizza and paper can exist within the same narrative. Rather than being contaminated by Ishmael and the Lone Ranger, aboriginality thrives upon these additions to and transformations of the storied universe. Harry Robinson's creation stories contain references to Chinese and white people precisely because these people are part of contemporary Okanagan experience and need to be explained. Dane-zaa stories about the first people mention cartridge belts because they are part of contemporary Dane-zaa experience. In "Coyote's Cannon," I suggested that, "Tom King's work is neo-premodern, not postmodern" (Ridington, 1999: 35).

As Julie Cruikshank suggests in The Social Life of Stories, First Nations storytellers "use narratives to dismantle boundaries rather than erect them," while at the same time constructing "meaningful bridges in disruptive situations" (Cruikshank 1998: 3-4). Cruikshank traces Yukon narrative deconstruction to disruptions of the 19th century, but I think she would agree with Armstrong that First Nations storytellers have always moved their audience between present and storied realities. In a very real sense, the listener has always shared authorship with the narrator; the symphony has been one in which, at times, "you are the conductor." Thomas King makes a similar point when he identifies the "I" of his novel as the reader who becomes the storyteller (King, personal communication).

Conclusion

Harry Robinson tells about the creator giving written instructions to the people he creates. Thomas King transforms Northrop Frye into Jehovah and Coyote's dream into a contrary Indian dog who thinks he is God. Gerald McMaster's Indians teach cowboys about the theory of transformation. Jeannette Armstrong sees Okanagan thought patterns in "rez English." Delgamuukw tells the Supreme Court of British Columbia that "ownership of territory is a marriage of the chief and the land" (1989: 7). Chief Samooh tells the same court that "Eagle down is our law." Dan Michel informs a conference of lawyers and academics that a Grizzly Bear instructed fisheries officers about aboriginal fishing rights. Monroe Swimmer instigates a policy of non-Indian removals.

Narrative technologies that helped people negotiate relations with the non-human persons of a natural environment can be adapted to the purposes of negotiating and articulating relations with the institutions of nation states. First Nations literatures include oratory, ceremony and the visual arts, as well as written texts. First Nations people have been successful in presenting themselves to courts of law and to courts of public opinion. Through an astute combination of honesty and irony, they have made themselves known in jurisprudence, in written literature and in the graphic and performing arts. First Nations literature is alive and well in Canada. Canadian anthropology has much to learn in conversation with this ongoing narrative. When you sing it now, just like new.

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