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Writing Over The Maple Leaf: Reworking the Colonial Native Archetype in Contemporary Canadian-Native Literature

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North American Gothic-Romanticism employs horrific images of Native people and culture as an over-arching theme of uncivilized society threatening colonization in North America. This Gothic-Romantic Native archetype is viewed today as an outdated, recycled and racist model in literature. For the purpose of this essay, the colonial Native archetype is described as a radicalized *Other* symbol. This means a realm of otherness, in comparison to characters of colonizer descent and the heroes of colonial literature, is embodied by symbols of the *Other*. The *Other* is most often represented by Native culture being the complete opposite of the colonizer. With that in mind, this essay acts as a survey of Canadian literature, displaying the most prominent themes surrounding Aboriginal representation. The purpose of this survey is to prove that Canadian-Native literature reworks the colonial *Other* archetype of Native culture and positively replaces Native themes and symbols in literature. Initially we describe a background of how Canadian colonial literature adopted the *Other* mentality from American Gothic-Romantic literature. Next, we will distinguish two over-arching themes present in contemporary Native literature that overtly demonstrate how the *Other* archetype is cast down by non-colonial authors. The all-encompassing theme of *writing back* present in Native literature is analyzed first. After this, the theme of reworking the Native archetype by way of two general techniques in Canadian literature is examined. These two techniques are: satirical representations of the colonial *Other* archetype and new inventive ways of positioning the Native in post-colonial literature. This analytical survey ultimately aims to prove contemporary Canadian-Native literature reworks the colonial *Other* archetype into a positive representation of real Native culture.

Step One: Creating A Buzz

To help pinpoint the roots of the *Other* in North American Gothic-Romanticism, consider this quote from Nathaniel Hawthorne's (1946) short story 'Young Goodman Brown', originally published in 1835, which depicts a radicalized Native character archetype: "Scattered also among their pale-faced enemies were the Indian priests, or powwows, who had often scared their native forest with more hideous incantations than any known to English witchcraft" (147). This excerpt depicts Aboriginal people in juxtaposition to the colonizer's belief system. The "Indians" are compared to English witchcraft, an archetypal symbolic combatant of nineteenth century national-religious unity in colonial America. The wilderness in Hawthorne's story is a Gothic representation of hell, where morality and decision making are tempted by evil, non-Christian forces. This *Other* representation exemplifies how Gothic-Romanticism written in colonial America represents Native culture, leading directly to contemporary Native literature's attempt to rework this depiction.

Much like 'Brown' and the coinciding popularization of Gothic-Romanticism in America, Canadian literature during the early nineteenth century began distinctly representing Native characters as *Other*. The best example of this is displayed in what is recognized as Canada's first novel, *Wacousta* by John Richardson, published in 1832. *Wacousta* is significant because it displays perfectly the colonial *Other* in early Canadian literature, specifically in Canadian Gothic-Romanticism, with the character of Wacousta. Essentially, Wacousta is a Native inhabitant of the North American wilderness who symbolically threatens societal progress of the colonizers. Margot Northey's (1976) *The Haunted Wilderness* identifies the obvious establishment of the Canadian *Other* prototype in *Wacousta*:

The unmistakably gothic dimension of *Wacousta*, and Richardson's belated attempt to contain it, are [. . .] evident in the depiction of the central character [Wacousta]. From his initial appearance, Wacousta is described as an almost superhuman figure of satanic defiance, whose huge presence commands awesome respect as well as increasing terror. (21)

During the early twentieth century, about a century after the *Other* mentality was established in Canadian literature by *Wacousta*, symbols depicting the colonial vantage point of Aboriginal culture became commonplace in a plethora of Canadian texts. The best example of Aboriginal stereotypes in this modernist Canadian literature comes from the poetry of Duncan Campbell Scott, with the colonial *Other* vision of Native-Newcomer relations fervently represented. For example, 'Indian Place-Names' sums up Scott's (1926) version of Canadian history: "The race that waned and left but tales of ghosts / That hover in the world like fading smoke / About the lodges: gone are the dusky folk / That once were cunning with the thong and snare" (22).

Scott's (1926) poem 'The Eagle Speaks' also provides a telling account of Native culture in its leading epigraph: "The Indians of the foothills of the Rocky Mountains capture eagles by concealing themselves, and seizing the birds as they attempt to take the bait set for them; in the combat that follows, the bird has sometimes been the victor" (32). These images of Native culture found in Scott's poetry represent the colonial *Other* viewpoint, with depictions of savage-like Native peoples at one with the Canadian wilderness.

However, regarding Scott's position on Aboriginality, his work as head of *Department of Indian Affairs* from 1913 to 1932 is free of any metaphorical opacity. He writes:

I want to get rid of the Indian problem. I do not think as a matter of fact,

that the country ought to continuously protect a class of people who are able to stand alone [. . .] Our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic and there is no Indian question, and no Indian Department. (Titley 1986, 50)

Clearly, Scott's view on continuing Native culture in Canadian society stems from the dominant colonizer mentality, and blatantly follows the thinking of the *Other* challenging colonial settlement.

Indeed, Richardson, Scott, and their contemporaries stylized *Wacousta* and further Native characters following the guidelines of the American Gothic-Romantic *Other*. These images further the uncivilized Native archetype in post-colonial Canada, a character opposed to colonial industrialization, deontological rule systems and, most importantly for the following analysis, imaged through the colonial literary vantage.

Moving into our focus of late twentieth century Canadian-Native literature, in March 1985, Native literature gained mass recognition when the University of Lethbridge, Alberta, hosted the *Native in Literature: Canadian and Comparative Perspectives* conference, welcoming a number of prominent authors and scholars researching the Native archetype in Canadian literature. In a compilation of speeches and writings presented in Lethbridge, Thomas King (1987) describes the then recent headway made in Native literature: "It has only been in the last twenty years that we have begun to look at the image of the Native in literature" (9). After the *Native in Literature* conference and publication, contemporary Native literature grew to one of the most-recognizable Canadian literary genres.

Understanding the history of literature in North America is crucial to understanding contemporary Native literature's position in Canadian society. The aforementioned historical overview brings us to look at contemporary Canadian-Native writing.

Step Two: Writing Back To The Colonizers

Writing back is a literary genre that allows previously colonized or otherwise inferior groups to reposition themselves socio-politically into an undominated role. *Writing back* is at the core of all contemporary Native literature. This is because, in order to re-place the Native archetype into the perspective of the Native author, the old colonial vantage point must be targeted, revealed, and indicted for its false teachings on the public mind. The Aboriginal writer,

symbolically and literally, takes back the pen and paper from the colonizer. Therefore, under guidance of *writing back*, all post-colonial Native literature first and foremost is political resistance.

The first step in recognizing Canadian-Native literature is establishing *writing back* as an all-encompassing discourse for the genre to support. In 1985, with the end of the *Native in Literature* conference, Canadian writer of Cree and Métis backgrounds Marilyn Dumont grew popular. Arguably one of Dumont's most famous poems, 'Letter To Sir John A. MacDonald' paints a clear picture of her opinion on post-colonial Canada in its indictment of Native-Métis stereotypes and political positioning. 'Letter' alludes to historical events like the Meech Lake Accord and the creation of the Canadian National Railway, along with historical figures like Louis Riel and Bill Wilson, within a timeline starting at Confederation and ending with present day. This timeline is created by the opening and closing lines using the term "halfbreed" that she says her people are "still here and callin themselves" (Dumont 2007, lines 1-29). The historical allusions within the linking opening and closing images suggest a significant continuum of racism throughout Canada's entire history.

However, 'Letter' does more than identify racism in Canada. Firstly, the poem is an example of apostrophe, a work directed toward a specific, absent person. Secondly, the apostrophic 'Letter' employs synecdoche, using a part of something to represent the whole. The absent person the poem is directed at is John A. MacDonald, and the whole concept he represents is colonialism. Furthermore, the poem's letter format seals its inspirational significance: Dumont is literally writing to MacDonald, backwards through time to when Native people did not have a voice. That MacDonald will of course not receive the message is unimportant; the fact that Dumont, as a Native writer, is now in a position to voice her opinion on colonialism solidifies the poem, and which this essay asserts all post-colonial Native literature, as *writing back*.

There are examples of *writing back* in all Native literature. Like in Tomson Highway's (1998) novel *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, when Amanda Clear Sky, a minor character who interacts with main characters Jeremiah and Gabriel, speaks up during high school history class:

'There were many bloody periods in human history,' her tone unflinching, with a sheen of anger, 'many of them occurring right here in North America.' [. . .] 'Such as the Cherokee Trail of Tears.' [. . .] 'Such as Wounded Knee, smallpox blankets, any number of atrocities done to the Indian people.' (148)

Amanda Clear Sky raises these issues in her history class, displaying synecdoche, with the spatial area in which Canadian and North American history is preached representing the whole discourse of false Aboriginal cultural representation. And, her “unflinching” tone of “anger” speaks out against North American colonization, concluding it to be “every bit as bloody as the French Revolution” (Highway 1998, 148). Therefore, Highway reiterates the *writing back* reason for all Native writing.

Step Three, Part One: Satirizing The Colonial Vantage Point Through Allusion

Understanding the specific intended, identified, yet absent audience of new Native authors is crucial when critiquing their specific rhetorical discourse and metaphorical techniques, as well as their socio-political positioning. Now, to identify the final step: targeting and revealing the colonial literary vantage point’s false representations of Native culture.

To start, Thomas King’s novel *Green Grass, Running Water* provides satirical qualities by following, among several intertwining subplots, a group of four aptly named characters: Hawkeye, The Lone Ranger, Robinson Crusoe, and Ishmael. They are not identified as Native from the onset, but the interesting names eventually surface as belonging to four “Indians. Old ones,” thought by Babo to be between four and five hundred years old (King 1998, 51). Later, it is spelled out by the four Natives exactly what they are doing in their journey across America and Canada, and through time from pre-colonial history to the present. This is illuminated when two main characters, Norma and Lionel, pick up the Native characters in their car, and Norma says “‘Nice to see our elders on vacation’” (King 1998, 122), a comment to which each member of the group replies:

‘Oh, we’re not on vacation,’ said Ishmael.

‘No,’ said Robinson Crusoe.

‘We’re working,’ said Hawkeye.

[. . .]

‘That’s right,’ said the Lone Ranger. ‘We’re trying to fix up the world.’

(King 1998, 122-123)

The response constructed by each of the four Natives indicates two important angles on reshaping the Native character. It will be helpful to draw on the work of Ibis Gomez-Vega (2000), who identifies *Grass* as a “magical-realist” text that transgresses colonial-created societal boundaries in which “King is able to rewrite many of the stories that the dominant culture has imposed on Native

Americans, beginning with the story of creation and with the John Wayne cult of supremacy over the ‘evil’ Indians” (1). With this in mind, it is seen how the four Natives serve a particular purpose to rework the colonial Native archetype. Robinson Crusoe and The Lone Ranger are working to satirize Aboriginal representation in, respectively, the fictional travelogues of renaissance writer Daniel Defoe and real accounts by other colonial voyageurs; and, nineteenth-century American Western drama.

In addition to their indictment of Native American representation in fiction and drama, the Lone Ranger, Hawkeye, Ishmael and Robinson Crusoe also suggest a reworking of Canadian representation with this conversation:

‘Are we in Mexico?’ said Hawkeye.
‘No,’ said the Lone Ranger. ‘I believe we are in Canada.’
‘Canada,’ said Ishmael. ‘What a good idea.’
‘Yes,’ said Robinson Crusoe. ‘We certainly enjoyed ourselves the last time we were here.’
(King 1998, 22)

Just as the group rewrites non-Canadian representation, in the above selection they reposition the Native in Canada. As the archetypal Native depictions of Scott and Richardson offer flat, one-sided, non-confrontational Natives in wilderness, Robinson Crusoe in *Grass* alludes to these representations by saying they, four stereotypical Native characters, “enjoyed” themselves when they were last here. The group’s work must be done to rewrite British literary characters and American type-cast roles, and here to rewrite the national stereotype in Canadian representation.

As noted above, contemporary Native authors like King rewrite the colonial version of the archetypal Native character. They make direct reference to cultural depictions of Natives from the onset of British colonization until the present day. Rising from this are distorted versions of the original characters, which satirize and reveal their misrepresentation in colonial literature.

Step Three, Part Two: Shape-Shifting

This section of our analysis on reworking the Native literary archetype analyses Native literature’s other symbolic half: not only satirizing where the colonizers went wrong, but identifying Aboriginal cultural themes they missed.

Oral Storytelling and Creation Stories

Recall the four “old Indians” from *Grass*. Their significance as a rewriting of the *Other* created by the colonizer is an attempt to re-place them in popular culture. For analysis purposes, another example of their leitmotif dialogue when attempting to tell the earth creation story is helpful:

‘That’s the wrong story,’ said Ishmael. ‘That story comes later.’
 ‘But it’s my turn,’ said the Lone Ranger.
 ‘But you have to get it right,’ said Hawkeye.
 ‘And,’ said Robinson Crusoe, ‘you can’t tell it all by yourself.’
 ‘Yes,’ said Ishmael.
 (King 1998, 14)

Here, notice how the four Native characters’ dialogue is presented in a chain-link image, with each character contributing one part of the message. Indeed, the chain links back to itself, creating a circle, with Ishmael providing the next offering of his group’s dialogue. Quite literally, King images them as talking in circles, which in general is how these characters speak in *Grass*.

On the whole, these characters uphold a circular narrative infused into the linear plot of the novel. This first symbolizes a paradoxical undercutting of linear storytelling that all novels inherently follow and, in *Grass*, the linear history imposed by the colonizers on Native histories that the text is countering.

It is also important to notice the attempt to tell an array of different creation stories within *Grass*. With the novel’s first line, “So. In the beginning, there was nothing. Just the water...” (King 1998, 1) the dialogue of Coyote, a God and the four Natives is continuously interjected between several other narratives. For the most part, these interjected dialogues allude to various creation and other religious/spiritual images, like Genesis in this scene: “In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth” (King 1998, 14); and a convoluted Aboriginal creation story featuring Changing Woman seen here: “Changing Woman falls out of the sky. She starts way up high, so she can see all around the water. And what she sees is all that water, and what she sees is a canoe” (King 1998, 144), among several others. The symbol of the four Native characters constantly talking in circles, paired with their own and Coyote’s creation stories constantly being interjected, and the continuing rhetoric of “starting over” does two things. “Starting over” brings the reader back to the beginning, representing a continuum in time. Then this counteracts the colonial placement of linear storytelling placed on traditional Native oral histories.

Writing Native creation stories is not exclusive to King’s work. For example, Highway’s *Kiss* is consumed with images of Sky Woman and allusions

to the Cree creation story. The opening chapter of the novel follows Abraham Okimasis winning the 1951 World Championship Dog Derby in Northern Ontario Native community of Eemanapiteepitat. In these scenes, Sky Woman is personified as the Fur Queen, who awards Abraham with a kiss and dance upon his win, before she transcends into the form of a star. Throughout the novel, the Fur Queen hovers over scenes, taking on many different personas in a constant allusion to the Cree creation story.

Capturing traditional Native culture like spiritual ceremonies, languages, and oral creation stories in writing provide Native authors with the opportunity to depict true viewpoints on Aboriginal culture. Like in *Grass* and *Kiss*, the creation stories provide symbolic context for the message being conveyed, and also effectively counteract the colonial vantage point of Native culture by shedding knowledge on Native spirituality. It is also important to understand the respect Native authors pay to cultural traditions when putting them into writing.

Language

Turcotte's (2003) essay 'Re-Marking on History, or, Playing Basketball with Godzilla: King's Monstrous Post-Colonial Gesture' notes this technicality evident in *Grass*: "A recurring theme in each of the Sun Dances that occurs in the book is the attempt by dominant culture 'shadow catchers' to photograph the Sun Dance and the determined and successful resistance of such appropriation by the people themselves" (7). Indeed, while Native authors display truthful accounts of their cultural traditions, they also counter the colonial perspective by respecting the ethical code of not creating an exploitative showcase of their culture.

The practice of cultural respect is also evident with Native authors' approach to writing down Native language. Turcotte's (2003) analysis goes on to say about *Grass* that "it is not surprising that [. . .] the stories are not glossed, and the Cherokee titles are printed in the Cherokee alphabet devised by Sequoia, neither translated nor even presented phonetically" (7).

Grass may not offer translations of its Native words, but other authors do. For example, Joseph Boyden's novel *Through Black Spruce* explains that Will's grandfather, Elijah Whiskeyjack (from Boyden's previous novel *Three Day Road*), was forced to accept a translation of his last name, originally Weesageechuk, when attending residential school. And, Highway even goes the length of providing a glossary of Cree terms used throughout the story in *Kiss*. But, these opposite techniques of providing, and not providing, translations to Native words still create the same outcome: Accurately representing Native language in post-colonial literature, an attempt that no colonial authors make.

While writing Native language in texts replaces colonial-English definitions of Native peoples in *Grass* and *Kiss*, Joseph Boyden's short story 'Painted Tongue' displays how complete non-participation in English language also counters the colonial vantage point. The story, which appears in the Boyden collection *Born With A Tooth*, depicts Painted Tongue, a Native man living on the streets of Toronto, who does not speak due to a lisp he acquired as a child, causing his friends to make fun of him. However, the symbol of a speechless man in post-colonial Toronto suggests more than self-consciousness. By Painted Tongue only humming his often anti-establishment minded thoughts, he refuses to take part in a crucial area of the colonizer's system. He literally does not communicate within the colonizers' system, representing a telling refusal to participate in the oppression of Native culture. Then, through his placement in a Native story, which we know *writes back* to the colonial writers, his silent message is loud and clear: I do not communicate with my oppressors.

Trickster Figures

In the preface to Highway's *Kiss* he provides the reader with a note on the trickster, a symbol he asserts as important in Native mythology as Christ to Christianity. The trickster, he writes, "can assume any guise he chooses. Essentially a comic, clownish sort of character, his role is to teach us about the nature and the meaning of existence; he straddles the consciousness of man and that of God, the Great Spirit" (Highway 1998, 1). The inclusion of trickster figures in literature allows the further redevelopment of Native culture.

Almost all Native literature employs the trickster to represent the metaphysical, comic-tragic character model previously absent from colonial writing. For example, Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach* employs a trickster character that helps the main character Lisa connect with her Aboriginal heritage lost in the wake of assimilation. Early in *Beach*, Lisa meets the trickster character who is personified as the little man with red hair who sits on her dresser at night. Ma-ma-oo, Lisa's grandmother, explains the man is "a guide, but not a reliable one," and that Lisa must "Never trust the spirit world too much" because its representatives "think different from the living" (Robinson 2000, 153). The little man with the red hair, the trickster figure in *Beach*, influences Lisa's decision making regarding her spiritual capabilities, which link her to her cultural heritage. She is faced with fulfilling her job as a Haisla spiritual medium and following Ma-ma-oo's guidance, or assimilating into dominant national culture like her parents insist she does in order to live equally beside her non-Native peers.

Residential Schooling and Christianity

The most notable author that tackles the residential schooling issue of post-colonial Canada, although all authors do address it, is Tomson Highway. Highway himself was a victim of residential school sexual abuse during the 1950s, and *Kiss* partly serves as an autobiographical account of his childhood during it and following teenage life. In the novel, brothers Jeremiah and Gabriel are subject to repeated sexual abuse when sent away to the residential school. There are many follies presented regarding the theme. For example, mother Mariesis's possible foresight of the abuse materialized in her protestation of sending older brother Jeremiah away: "But couldn't he wait two years? Until Gabriel can go with him? That school is so far away" intertwined with the parents' compliancy with the system: "'*Soonie-eye-gimow's* orders, Father Bouchard says. It is the law'" (Highway 1998, 40). Here, it is assumed that the boys' mother knows something terrible will happen to them, which is Highway's foreshadowing of what history entails.

However, the abuse's impact on Gabriel's life offers the best indictment of Canadian residential schools. In chapter twenty-five of *Kiss*, Gabriel transforms into a convoluted Christ image during Reconciliation at mass:

The six-year-old Lord took a slice, turned to his guests - the boys of Birch Lake School, six to his left, six to his right, including Jeremiah-Judas - and told the starving crew that they would each get a piece on one condition: that they refrain from speaking English. (Highway 1998, 179)

Noticing the significance of this image can be uneasy, but two important facts alongside the theme of residential schooling solidify its meaning. Firstly, the scene comes at roughly three quarters of the way in the book. On a visual depiction of the novel's linear timeline, this scene would be marked like: ---I- , a crucifix symbol. So, depicting Gabriel through this specific image at this point of the timeline symbolizes him as an image of Christ. Secondly, at the end of the chapter, after receiving communion, Gabriel sees "At every step he took, ghost-white masks and gaping mouths [that] lunged and shrieked: 'Kill him! Kill him! Nail the savage on the cross, hang him high, hang him dead!'" (Highway 1998, 181). So, it can be asserted that Gabriel represents the theory of Christian sacrifice, and Christ himself. However, the creation of Gabriel as a purely traditional Christ figure is problematic. He is metaphorically sacrificed by accepting the burden of sexual abuse done to him by Father Eustache. As a result, no Native children are absolved of their "sins" because Jeremiah and Gabriel do not speak up about Father Eustache's sexual abuse. Thus, Gabriel becomes an inverted Christ figure, being needlessly tortured and sacrificed, ironically at the hands of a Catholic priest. This image represents Highway's attempt to place the burden of residential school abuse back on the Catholic Church, an excellent

example of combating the follies of colonization through literature.

Full Circle

Our discussion of contemporary Canadian-Native literature identifies three main *steps* the genre takes to counter the colonial *Other* archetype of Native culture. They are the overarching mega-theme of *writing back* inherently encoded in Native literature, two factions within the genre's discourse of satirically rewriting the colonial Native archetype and inventively displaying cultural themes that fall below the colonial radar. In this three-step analysis, with the last being the most contemporary view on Native representation, we see Native culture now represented in literature most truthfully, and how Native culture is re-established before colonial representation. Native authors undercut the colonial vantage point of Native symbolism and representation, and successfully rework the Native *Other* archetype.

As a final lasting image, we must understand that Native literature as a whole indoctrinates the theme of a continuum. Inculcated in most Native beliefs is the idea that everything is connected. Shown through our analysis of Native creation stories, most notably in King's *Grass*, oral storytelling juxtaposes the very idea of a book. Linear progression is obsessed with beginning and end, and leads to deontological rule systems that imbed oppositional thinking within the human thought process. When everything has an opposite, finding your enemy is instinct. As within colonial literature, attacking non-civilization is key to progressing the colonization.

Technically, books represent an entirely non-Native way of thinking. As Highway also tells in *Kiss*, the trickster figure, the central image in Native mythology and spiritual stories, is asexual; S/he symbolizes the makeup of all humans, human knowledge and, presumably, God. There are no sexes in Aboriginal languages. Therefore, traditional Native thinking is free from hierarchies; and polar opposites like right and wrong, good and bad, evil and holy. In Native teaching, everything is equal; good is not set up to be countered, it floats centrally with outside forces striking into it.

The reader's obvious observation, then, is that Native literature is hypocritical. If Native authors do not believe in linear storytelling, and the non-Native way of thinking that must follow, Native literature undercuts its purpose. To stay true to Native culture, Native authors must not participate in literature.

This essay counters that notion. Colonization raped Native inhabitants of North America, in ways constantly being recognized and still to be discovered in the future, of their traditional culture. Cultures and languages disappeared into the dust of chuck-wagons, wakes of expedition ships, and under British colonialism. Therefore, writing is the only way Native people, in respect to literature, can reposition themselves under their own guise in the post-Colonial world. They must join the system through writing in order to correct the misrepresentation of their culture(s). Writing *over* the maple leaf then becomes an intensely strong metaphor. Canada tried to snuff out Native culture with foreign laws. So, Native authors symbolically splash their bloody history on Canada, literally and physically disrespecting the site of their oppression in order to refute it; to blacken the oppressor's vibrant gallantry with what history forgets.

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