

## Writing Voices Speaking: The Aesthetic of Talk in Thomas King's *Medicine River*

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Article abstract

One of the key themes in Thomas King's *Medicine River* is the deconstruction of a dichotomy between the dominant aesthetic modes of non-Native versus Aboriginal cultures. The non-Native narrative aesthetic is represented by photography and embodied in the novel's protagonist, Will Horse Capture. The contrasting Aboriginal narrative aesthetic of talk is embodied in the figure of Harlen Bigbear. King emulates the speech rhythms of Aboriginal talk and oral storytelling to both illustrate and call into question these aesthetic modes. The deconstruction of paradigms is an ever-present subtext of *Medicine Hat* and other works by King, and, today is central to contemporary Aboriginal studies.

# Writing Voices Speaking: The Aesthetic of Talk in Thomas King's *Medicine River*

JACK ROBINSON

SINCE THE PUBLICATION of *Medicine River* in 1991, the discourse on literature by Aboriginal writers has spawned a series of ideals and binaries. On the cultural/political level, Labrador Metis scholar Kristina Fagan observes that Native people have been defined as “the political ‘good guys’” who stand for “all that is non-centred, non-oppressive, kind, and good” (240). On the aesthetic level, Aboriginal narrative theory has effectively countered the assumption of the inferiority of oral traditions and the communities from which they grow. Marshall McLuhan argued that such communities exhibit the “utter inhibition and suppression of mental and personal life which is unavoidable in a non-literate world” (18). In countering this view, scholars have romanticized orality, as noted by J. Edward Chamberlain: “In these theories, societies that claim an oral tradition ... are celebrated for the refreshing vitality and natural power of their expression and for their freedom from the imperial corruptions and degenerate artifices of written forms” (140). The multivocal and multivalent aesthetic of talk enables one to articulate a response to the challenge issued by Emma Larocque when she calls for a critical turn toward the study of the aesthetics of Aboriginal literature. As an analogue for narratives influenced by orality, talk enables readers to understand what Larocque calls the “multidimensionality of Native works and personalities” (217). With its ever-shifting balance between direction and indirection; with its intimacy, its blurring of the border between speaker and listener, its implicit need for attentive listening, and its lyrical use of common speech and language in order to convey symbolic implications, the aesthetic of talk clarifies the interplay between perfection of form and deliberate looseness of form in Thomas King's *Medicine River*. With its emphases upon imperfection, fluidity, and inclusion, the aesthetic of

talk reveals how Thomas King's little-examined first novel deconstructs a plethora of ideals and binaries that have beset the reading of Aboriginal literature.

Exploring the reasons for the immense popular success of *Medicine River*, Renée Hulan and Linda Warley note that the CBC television movie interpreted the novel as an entertainment for a mass non-Native audience. The film universalized the main character's "coming home" to his Blackfoot culture; it also reduced the novel's multi-dimensional portrait of a Blackfoot community in transition to a one-dimensional romantic comedy plot with a neat nuclear family ending (132). Hulan and Warley also find that the few critical studies of the novel before 1995 focused on its comic portrayal of stereotypes of the Aboriginal. They note that these interpretations domesticate difference and fail to consider the novel as a work of resistance literature that "makes a political point by refusing explanation within the terms of the mainstream" (139). In contrast, Giselle Rene Lavalley warns against an emphasis on the aesthetic features of the novel that can be easily absorbed into the non-Native literary tradition (ironies, parallelisms, etc), while neglecting its cultural and political dimensions: "the simplistic imbibing of King's text into the traditional Western literary matrix neglects to address the social-political specificities of the novel's Aboriginal topography" (5). Dismantling this false dichotomy between the aesthetic and the cultural/political, this article claims that the novel has an aesthetic uniqueness that can be understood only *as an essential part of* its specifically Blackfoot and broadly Aboriginal cultural context, and of its political position as a work of resistance literature.

It is impossible for non-Native readers of Aboriginal literature to experience fully what Margery Fee and Jane Flick have called "the pure pleasure of getting the point of the joke, the pleasure of moving across the border separating insider and outsider" (132).

Thomas King reminds us that non-Native readers must approach what he calls "associational literature" as providing "a limited and particular access to a Native world, allowing the reader to associate with that world without being encouraged to feel a part of it" ("Godzilla" 12). It is wise also to take seriously a number of pitfalls that confront the non-Native scholar of Aboriginal literature. Helen Hoy warns against "too-easy identification by the non-Native reader, ignorance of historical or cultural allusion, obliviousness to the presence or properties of Native genres, and the application of irrelevant aesthetic standards" (9). It is also a mistake to

describe *Medicine River* as a shallow entertainment; nonetheless, as Hulan and Warley suggest, this misapplied label has mitigated against a proper critical assessment of King's aesthetic achievement and a full recognition of his political message in his first novel. The dismissal becomes especially problematic when applied to all Aboriginal authors and their texts, as King notes in his 2003 Massey lecture, *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative*. When King recalls his exasperation with non-Native responses to his early speeches as a Native activist, he declares the current predicament facing him and all Aboriginal authors:

As long as I dressed like an Indian and complained like an Indian, I was entertainment. But if I dressed like a non-Indian and reasoned like a non-Indian, then not only was I not entertainment, I wasn't Indian.

Stay with me.

Therefore, if I dressed like an Indian and acted like an Indian – and here it would help if you've seen the witch skit in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* – I must be ... entertainment.

Most of you are probably waiting for the sting, where I turn this conceit back on itself and say something profound or at least clever. But, as it turns out, I have nowhere to go.

What am I?

Entertainment.

Actually, as it turns out, it's not just me. It's Indians in general. Somewhere along the way, we ceased being people and somehow became performers in an Aboriginal minstrel show for White North America. (*Truth* 68)

This one-dimensional portrait of Native authors as entertainers of non-Native audiences must be mediated by a consideration of the prominent place of comedy in Aboriginal cultures. While he admits that Native humour is often misunderstood or ignored by non-Natives, Anishnabe storyteller Basil Johnston asserts that Native peoples have always loved laughter and that they have conveyed serious meanings beneath the comic level of their traditional stories: "It is precisely because our tribal stories are comic and evoke laughter that they have never been taken seriously outside the tribe.... But behind and beneath the comic characters and the comic situations exists the real meaning of the story" (14).

By articulating its own aesthetic, *Medicine River* demonstrates Anishnabe scholar Armand Garnet Ruffo's assertion that "the literature itself

tells us what it is; theories of criticism, ways of approaching the literature, will necessarily come from the literature and not be foisted upon it" (114). *Medicine River* tells us clearly that one of its key themes is the deconstruction of a dichotomy between the dominant aesthetic modes of non-Native versus Aboriginal cultures. The non-Native narrative aesthetic is represented by photography and embodied in the novel's apparent hero, Will Horse Capture; the contrasting Aboriginal narrative aesthetic of talk is embodied in the novel's subversive or subliminal hero, Harlen Bigbear. These claims regarding the place and meaning of photography in the text are anticipated by Priscilla Walton, who argues that Will's first-person narrative is his attempt to fix or reify his past according to his present view of it, or to rewrite his past in response to his present emotional needs. Walton aligns Will and his chosen vocation with non-Native culture with her assertion that "This is very similar to the non-Native endeavour to construct a presence by confining Natives to its preferred vision of them" (82). Walton goes on to assert that chapter fifteen subverts this "single, constructed, confining interpretation" by contrasting the lifeless photograph from Will's past with the symbolically inclusive communal photograph by the river (82). In the photograph, Floyd's granny wears the same expression as Will's mother in the photograph from the past: both look beyond the frame. The communal photograph thus "mirrors the text's inclusive impetus," Walton claims, for "the photograph refuses efforts to control it," just as the text itself looks beyond its own narrative frame, and, in so doing, "refuses a paradigm of centres versus margins" (83).

The text thus deconstructs the dichotomy partly by showing that photographs can be used for different purposes. On one hand, there are photographs that stifle and control. Under the objectifying gaze of the non-Native department store photographer, dressed in store clothes, Will and his brother James look, as Harlen points out, "like someone sprayed you up and down with starch" (215). The first photograph evokes the non-Native aesthetic of attempting to frame and fix the flow of reality through art. This photograph eliminates the flux of nature from the process of producing the artifact (no windblown hair, etc.), and also of standing at a distance to get a proper view, separating subject and object from any possible intercourse so that a supposedly "objective" perspective can be achieved. This kind of photograph exemplifies what Linda Hutcheon calls photography's way of refusing experience (47). This is why E.H. Gombrich notes that we erroneously assume the camera to be "an innocent

eye" (183) and why Susan Sontag argues that photography is "a powerful instrument for depersonalizing our relation to the world" (167). Yet as Walton notes, the chapter also presents a different view of photography. Will's photograph of Joyce Blue Heron's extended family, taken down by the river, is a way of embracing the flux of experience and of expressing reverence for a changing universe (214-215). Will tacks both photos to his kitchen wall, suggesting that his past upbringing in non-Native culture and his present rediscovery of his Blackfoot culture are dialogically alive within his current self (216). The novel's symbolic use of names also suggests that this dialogue can be influenced by his volition, his Will.

The one-dimensional view of photography as a stultifying art form is thus called into question. While it is true that his vocation symbolizes Will's approach to his life as a psychological refuge, it also symbolizes his means of living more fully. Though he has hidden behind the camera, Will "gets into the picture" of his own personal and cultural life by gradual increments. Using his camera shutter's time-release button to take the communal photograph, he makes twenty-four runs from behind the camera to the first row of the subjects in an attempt to get the perfect image. He fails and has to be satisfied that, out of the twenty-four photographs, "there were four or five where nearly everyone was facing the camera and smiling" (215). In that symbolic moment of aesthetic surrender, he begins to escape from the aesthetic of perfect form and to use photography as a bridge between himself and others. The photograph by the river is symbolic of Will's ever-incomplete re-entrance into the Blackfoot community and his ongoing emotional re-connection with others.

Turning attention from Will Horse Capture to Harlen Bigbear means shifting the focus to the aesthetic of talk. Harlen's relentless gossiping and storytelling have the goal of taking care of members of the community. Like the spider, he repairs the web of community wherever it is damaged (31). Because of his constant awareness that "People are fragile" (31), he takes great care with how he talks to people, and he approaches the truth with care and consideration. He always circles slowly around his point because he is "temperate in his insistence on the whole truth all at once" (176). Harlen explains that "the truth's like a green-broke horse," and, developing the simile, advises caution because the truth can hurt others: "you never know which way it's going to jump or who it's going to kick" (176-177). While he is cautious about how he says things, Harlen is also open: Will finds him to be "more concerned with the free flow of

information than with something as greedy as personal privacy” (181).

Harlen’s talk and storytelling involve closeness between subject and object, ongoing dialogue, lack of closure, and multi-layered meaning. Harlen establishes with his listeners, including Will, the kind of interaction that the orally-influenced narrative establishes with the reader. Kimberly M. Blaeser argues that the aesthetic goal of Aboriginal oral-based texts is to “encourage a response-able way of reading — an imagiNative, interactive, participatory creation of story” (65). In this participatory kind of reading, involving an active co-operation between reader and writer in co-constructing the meanings of the text, it is crucial that the reader read closely and listen carefully. Such attentiveness is mirrored in perhaps the most important aspect of Harlen’s personality: he prides himself on being a sensitive listener. Connecting talk and story, Harlen describes his keen “ear for depression” in others by reference to stories he has heard about great powers of hearing: “You know, Will, women can hear their babies even before they start to cry. And Barney Oldperson’s dog, Skunker, can hear Barney’s half-ton coming across the river eight miles away” (103).

Just as these stories partake of local and general popular mythology and are possibly apocryphal, Harlen’s self-proclaimed sensitivity to others’ feelings is highly fallible: his intuitions about others’ emotions are sometimes inaccurate. Often, they are naïve projections of his intention to “fix the world,” as befits the Trickster. Similarly, while no one can dispute the comic circular reasoning in Harlen’s dictum that “People who keep secrets generally got something to hide” (181), Harlen’s campaign against secret-keeping involves clumsy and self-centred indiscretions. In all his or her guises from Coyote to Weesaykayjac to Nanabush to Raven, Trickster is the *bricoleur* who makes mistakes in his/her impulsive and egotistical efforts to fix the world: Mac Linscott Ricketts and Jarold Ramsey refer to Coyote the fixer-upper as the creator of the imperfect world inhabited by humanity, the world-as-it-is (qtd. in Bright 21-22). Another layer to Harlen’s character is added when we consider that King’s contribution to the revival of the Trickster involves a reverence for the feminine. King has said that Harlen’s way of caring about members of the community means that he takes a feminine approach to talk: “Harlen’s job is making sure that the world is in good health. And in order to do that you can’t yell at people and tell them what to do. You have to use what I suppose is *a more feminine approach*” (Rooke 67).

King is in the habit of questioning gender borders; this is not the

only instance of his depicting Coyote as female. In his short story, "A Coyote Columbus Story," Coyote is described throughout as "she" (*Story* 119-128). In his essay, "Shooting the Long Ranger," King uses both an altered photograph and an altered narrative about the Lone Ranger to suggest that behind his famous mask, the icon of non-Native heroism was actually an Aboriginal man or possibly even a woman (57). In the generalized Aboriginal creation myth described in King's 2003 Massey lecture, Charm (Thought Woman) represents co-operation and the acceptance of complexity and diversity (*Truth* 22-24). This may lead us to surmise that King takes a firm ideological position on femininity, perhaps one aligned with Janice Acoose's insistence that indigenous peoples' writing in Canada "grows out of a woman-centred harmonious way of life" (113). More specifically, one might assume that his view of Blackfoot culture accords with anthropologist Alice B. Kehoe's assertion that traditional Blackfoot culture welcomed unconventional gender behaviour, as demonstrated by the Algonkian language definition of gender that does not distinguish between male and female (Kehoe 120). Indeed, such a traditional acceptance of strong women who play unconventional gender roles is implied by the novel's portrayal of the "formidable" Louise Heavyman. An accountant who is prepared to bring up her daughter on her own, Louise is, according to Granny Oldcrow, "like the women who used to fight with the men. Real tough, those women. They could ride all day" (224).

Yet the overall text deconstructs an ideal by portraying strong Blackfoot women who also display imperfections. Bertha Morley, who works at the Friendship Centre, is depicted as being a little too forthright in her use of her "talent for rescuing the truth from falsehoods and flights of fancy" (176). Bertha's directness is contrasted with Harlen's more subtle and considerate approach to the truth, and is treated satirically or parodically in her metaphorical depiction as a frog: "The minute she heard an exaggeration buzzing around, her head would snap up, and her tongue would flick out and slap it against the wall" (176). Similarly, the strength of Will's mother, Rose, in being able to bring up her two sons on her own, marooned in the non-Native culture of Calgary, is not idealized. Rather, emphasis is given to Rose's inability to provide her sons with information about their father, or to realize that they would need such knowledge, because it hurts her too much to speak of him. Though she has never hit him before, she slaps Will when, as a boy, he finds and reads his father's letters to her (6). Only when he is a grown man living in Toronto does she



respond with empathy to Will's childhood plea about the letters: "Those are my letters, too" (7); only then does she send him, with his usual birthday shirt, a photograph of his father; only then does she realize that her son needs some awareness of his father: "'That's him,' the letter said, as if knowing was an important thing for me to have" (87). Thus, the ideal of the strong Blackfoot woman is treated with some irony in the overall text, just as the border between the genders is treated as permeable and redefinable; with regard to gender, as with other matters, the novel refuses what Walton calls "a paradigm of centres versus margins."

The deconstruction of paradigms is the ever-present subtext of Harlen's slowly circling talk, containing many stories that encourage the reader to listen closely and to make his or her own interpretations. This Aboriginal understanding of storytelling is given comic and serious emphasis when Harlen, in his role as caretaker of the community, advises Will, as a senior member of the basketball team, to tell some stories to Clyde Non-Nativeman, a young Blackfoot man with enormous basketball talent, who always gets into trouble with the non-Native justice system. Harlen suggests that Will tell Clyde some "stories about staying out of trouble" (123). Like the novel itself, the stories appear to be superficially amusing but are also profoundly instructive. Harlen comically assumes that Will's father would have told him some stories of this kind; "the kind that made you laugh, but then when you looked underneath them, you could see they were serious, and you knew he was trying to help" (123). This did not happen because Will never knew his non-Native father, who would also not have participated in such an oral storytelling tradition. The text thus upholds the intentions, values, and methods of the oral storytelling tradition, while it treats them ironically by transplanting a key mythic figure from that tradition into this narrative of comic realism. The humour of Harlen's mistaken assumption must again be understood as an expression of the irrepressible egotism of the Trickster. This multi-layered character plays the fool but is also in earnest; he is childish self-centred but also possesses a child's innocence, optimism, and idealism. The text's refreshing message is that Harlen's serious intentions matter, but so do his comically faulty assumptions. In emphasizing all sides of this multidimensional figure, the text conveys the essence of the Trickster's mythic power and employs a traditional Aboriginal form of irony.

The serious symbolic meanings beneath the deceptively superficial comic surface of the narrative are seen when Harlen has the idea that he

and Will should get out on the river in a canoe “just like our grandparents used to do.” Will points out that “The Blackfoot didn’t use canoes” (241). The nations of the Blackfoot confederacy were peoples whose homeland, Nitawahsi, stretched along the eastern foothills of the Rockies and into the prairies, through today’s Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Montana (*Blackfoot* 4). The Blackfoot were game hunters who never used canoes and never ate fish, though they revered rivers and lakes as sacred (*Blackfoot* 9). So it is no surprise that when Harlen and Will buy a decrepit canoe at an estate sale, they have no knowledge of how to repair it, especially since it is made of wood and canvas (161) and is thus of a kind never used by Aboriginals of any tribe. The two run amuck when they follow the description of local rivers in a book that comes with the canoe, running into rapids not shown on the book’s maps (247). On an interpersonal level, the episode suggests Harlen’s wisdom in getting Will out of the studio and into the imperfect world, where friends help each other to cope with their mistakes through shared laughter. On an intercultural level, it suggests cultural dislocation and questions the accuracy of non-Native maps of the world, particularly when used by Aboriginals. On a metafictional level, it implies the inadequacies of textuality and conveys a Trickster-like warning to be wary of the deceptions of the novel itself.

In the context of this fictional consideration of differing cultural constructions of meaning, the novel offers some de-centering commentary on symbol-making. Paula Gunn Allen comments that the plains tribes’ use of the sacred hoop or medicine wheel, representing the ever-changing wholeness and harmony of life, was a matter of cultural practice (56). This is the case when Harlen refers to Chief Mountain, Ninastiko, in order to encourage Will to move from Toronto to Medicine River: “Can’t see Ninastiko from Toronto,” he says (93). Ninastiko or Chief Mountain, in present-day Montana near the Medicine River, was the spiritual centre of the Blackfoot confederacy: in the novel, it brings the Blackfoot of the Standoff reserve the spiritual knowledge of being at home: in both fact and fiction, the location itself is sacred and remains so throughout the tribe’s history (*Blackfoot* 51). In his circuitous stories, however, Harlen also uses his own freelance methods of symbol-making that are not especially cultural in nature. This is apparent when he tells Will that “it’s symbolic” (233) that Louise has torn the darkroom out of her new house, after finding that Will was not interested in moving in (228). For his own reasons, Harlen decides to assign a conceptual and emotional meaning

to an action. The most we can say of this sort of symbol-making is that it serves as a reminder of the necessity of close reading: just as Harlen reads the Louise's actions closely, we read him closely also, discovering that his matchmaking intentions prove to be futile and mistaken, as are many of the Trickster's efforts to "fix the world." The text's message about symbolic meanings lies not in whether they are traditional symbols, endorsed by Blackfoot culture, but in what they reveal about the complexity of character and the instability of truth. The gaps embedded in orally-influenced narratives reveal exactly the kind of meaning that Paula Gunn Allen describes as central to American Indian thought: an "enduring sense of the fluidity and malleability, or creative flux, of things" (68).

Kimberly M. Blaeser argues that the goal of Native authors is "to destroy the closure of their own texts by making them perform, turning them into dialogue, releasing them into the place of imagination" (56). Blaeser goes on to ask, "how do they bring talk off the page, or write voices speaking?" (61). In *Medicine River*, one means of bringing talk off the page is by using a prose style and cultivating a use of language that reproduces or emulates the speech rhythms of Aboriginal talk and oral storytelling. Aboriginal talk and oral narratives possess a remarkable economy of style or a minimalism of verbal expression that could be called an evocative terseness. Jarold Ramsey's analysis of such narrative methods makes the case clearly: "One universal characteristic of the printed texts of the traditional Indian literatures is their tacit, economical texture... typically, more is suggested in the withholding of narrative and descriptive details than in the outright rendering of them" (qtd in Blaeser 63). This economical style is the Aboriginal writer's way of requiring readers to participate in the construction of the story's meaning: "Native storytelling often self-consciously and purposefully proceeds by suggestion and implication because it thus becomes a dialogue or pluralistic creation" (Blaeser 63). The writer refrains from interpreting the tale too much, so that readers will become more attentive listeners and active interpreters. The cryptic meanings are implied rather than stated, so that the spade work of detecting these embedded meanings will mirror the difficulty of applying them to life: as Swampy Cree tribesman William Smith puts it, "Too easy to find you might think it too easy to do" (qtd. in Blaeser 64).

Robert Dale Parker is thus mistaken in his argument that in *Medicine River*, an "aesthetic of the prosaic" eschews the poetic (163). On the contrary, the novel's lyrical prose comprises a poetic depth of connotation

and allusion that requires close reading.

In *Medicine River*, several interrelated phrasings, images, or metaphors are placed throughout the narrative: the task of reading closely for the interconnections between them is left to the attentive reader. These subtle suggestions are often poetic, both when considered singly and when taken together. The spare suggestive prose of the novel is a particular kind of poetic language. It is vibrant, evocative, and not always easy to decipher, with its cross-references to other episodes within the novel and its allusions to Aboriginal cultural history.

A poetic power of suggestion is seen in some phrasings that are used to depict Harlen Bigbear's brother, Joe, who is one of Harlen's best-kept secrets. Harlen never mentions Joe (153), and Joe does not stay with Harlen, whose door is always open, because they are "different" (164). Harlen is soft-spoken and considerate, while Joe is bombastic and self-displaying. For Joe, jumping off the trestle bridge over the Medicine River after a night of drinking is "like flying," whereas to Will, the thought of hitting the water is "like death" (161). Will describes Joe's jumping as "letting go of everything" (164). After Joe jumps, he swims away to continue his world travels, while Will and Harlen, the "barn owls," climb down and console themselves by saying that "climbing down was harder than jumping" (164). This series of lyrical phrasings associates Joe with sky, flight, independence, and individual transcendence of earthly ties, while it associates Will and Harlen with earth, community, humus and humility. Not globetrotters or creatures of the limelight, they seek only to be part of the land and the people. The language reveals that Will and Harlen embody the responsible participation in the community and in the natural world suggested by the phrase "all my relations" (*Relations* ix).

Another use of tersely poetic phrasing suggests another meaningful character foil. Just as Joe seeks fame and transcendence of the earth, so does activist David Plume, who has a blurred photograph of himself with some famous AIM (American Indian Movement) activists, supposedly taken at Wounded Knee. David brings the photo to Will for retouching, carrying it in an envelope that he waves "as though it were a wing" (190). The phrase reminds the reader of Will's comment that Joe's jumping was like flying, so that the similarity of the two images urges the reader to find a thematic connection between the two episodes. David cannot fly with one wing, any more than he can find any sustainable personal

fulfillment in his self-celebrated memory of being one of a courageous group of “brothers in arms.” Similarly, the sense of liberation and freedom that Joe feels in jumping from the bridge is revealed by the text to be a questionable escape from community.

Other suggestive phrasings reveal another related foil. David Plume reminds Will of Maydean Joe, the “retarded” girl from Will’s childhood: both are willing to get into dark enclosed spaces in order to belong. For Maydean Joe, it is a clothes dryer (195); for David, it is the back of a van, which he invites Will to enter also, as he heads off on a trip to Ottawa to protest federal cuts in funding for Aboriginal education (199). Will watches the activists drive away; then, the chapter closes with a phrase that contrasts strongly with the images of the dark enclosed spaces of the dryer and the van: “Later, I went back to the studio and turned on all the lights and opened the doors” (200). Will uses intensely poetic language to convey an unexplained image that the reader must decipher. The image conveys Will’s uneasiness about David’s intense desire to belong, as clarified through the foil of Maydean Joe. Yet the text also invites us to read Will’s character critically, and on this level, the image reminds the reader of Will’s profound reticence about his own desire to belong. Thus, the chapter’s climactic image blurs a binary; in this case, between two definitions of belonging and community: the text does not affirm one kind of belonging and reject the other; rather, it explores the ironies of each as they emerge in the flow of the story.

Will’s anxiety about belonging is evoked in another beautifully simple and powerfully evocative use of phrasing. Commenting on the communal photograph by the river, Will says, “I was smiling in that picture, and you couldn’t see the sweat” (216). Will also sweats when Louise asks him about moving in with her, while they lie in bed together: “The blankets in the bed were heavy. I was beginning to sweat” (228). Exertion could partially explain the first instance, as Will runs back and forth many times to get into the picture, but the second scene mentions no recent exertion, sexual or otherwise, nor had the heavy blankets made Will perspire *before* Louise asked her question. These corresponding mentions of perspiration evoke Will’s nervousness about two levels of commitment: first, his social commitment to the community; second, his personal commitment to Louise.<sup>1</sup>

Specific phrasings suggest the central theme of community in both Aboriginal and non-Native contexts. Will’s non-Native girlfriend in To-

ronto, Susan Adamson, has a suggestive last name. Like the “sons of Adam,” the males of non-Native society, she defines personal freedom as complete personal independence, a release from interpersonal bonds. She secretly uses her affair with Will as a stepping stone to leave her marriage, then leaves Will for another lover, and finally tells Will that she has discovered what men have always known: that she can “do life” alone (230). Just as Joe’s jumping off the bridge struck Will as a “letting go of everything,” Will concludes that “After all, Susan had left everyone” (224). Again, the connotative phrasing links the two episodes and urges readers to compare the two characters. Through the character foil of Joe Bigbear and Susan Adamson, the text is able to make the point that the failures of individuals to make personal and social commitments are not specific to one gender or culture. Nor does the text identify one kind of heroism as non-Native and another kind as Aboriginal; in fact, the narrative deconstructs the dichotomy between a non-Native emphasis on the independence of the hero and an Aboriginal emphasis upon allegiance to community: the weakness of communal bonds is apparent in both Joe and Susan, while the problems of communal attachments are apparent in both David and Will.

Poetic detail and diction also evoke the allusiveness that is common in poetry, as seen in Will’s daydream about himself and Harlen breaking into the Custer monument in Billings, Montana. There is an embedded cultural allusion when Harlen jokes about a photograph for the local Indian paper, depicting himself and Will standing over Custer’s grave. Harlen suggests the caption below the photograph would be “Custer Died for Your Sins” (110). Vine Deloria Jr. records that this phrase was used in a popular American bumper sticker campaign and that the sentence refers to the U.S. government breaking the Sioux Treaty of 1868. Deloria asserts that the government’s breaking its word necessitates, according to the Old Testament penalty for breaking the covenant, a blood sacrifice (148). The phrase is also a satirical inversion of the common Christian maxim that “Christ died for our sins.” The two meanings expose the brutal dominance and hypocrisy of colonial history. They also suggest a critique of Christianity that King expands upon in his 2003 Massey lectures. After contrasting the values embedded in Christian and Aboriginal creation stories, he asks whether “the martial and hierarchical nature of Western religion and Western privilege has fostered stories that encourage egotism and self-interest” (*Truth* 26).

King's purpose in his Massey lecture is not to suggest that North Americans must or can choose between Christian and Aboriginal creation stories, nor does he seek to create a nostalgia for the noble values of Aboriginal stories (*Truth* 29). The choice he suggests is not dichotomous and instantaneous; rather, like all storytellers, he attempts to suggest the complexity of life as it is currently lived. On a cross-cultural or colonial level, he implies that contemporary society must make use of the truths found in Aboriginal stories. We must find the truths that are in-between, King implies, by respecting cultural differences and by adapting new values from old stories. This in-between cultural position in which both Aboriginals and non-Natives find themselves is the same place where Gerald Vizenor says the Metis people have always found meaning – “not in the sides but in the seam in between” (qtd in Lavalley 24).

The same message about living “in the seam” is imparted in the poetic image that closes chapter seven in *Medicine River*. This chapter, concerning past and present stories of Will's emotional disconnection from women and from his own cultural history as an Aboriginal, concludes with his daydream of his own personal attack on the kid guarding the Custer monument, “bullets flying around me, the kid yelling for reinforcements, the phone ringing busy in my ear” (115). The busy signal, sounding like an alarm, evokes Will's romantic disconnection from the women of his present and past, Louise and Susan; the attack on the monument suggests his urgent need to reclaim his cultural history. The image carries the message that change occurs slowly on personal and cultural levels. By the end of the novel, Will has made only limited progress in reclaiming his emotional and cultural life. Yet in making this slow progress, Will embodies King's suggestion in his Massey lectures that Aboriginals and non-Natives must make slow and arduous cultural progress together. To say that we all live in a space that is culturally in-between or “in the seam” is an accurate description for many. For others, such liminality may not be a reality, but for all it is a necessary means of escaping a polarized world of centres versus margins and of tempering the destructive truths of the dominant non-Native Christian mythology. This is what King means when he ends each of his five Massey lectures and his Afterword by re-iterating, “You've heard it now,” reminding his mixed non-Native and Aboriginal audience of their response-ability to the story (or the cluster of stories) they have heard (29,59,89,119,151,167).

In *Medicine River*, many embedded allusions to Blackfoot and Abo-

iginal history are evoked with poetic suggestiveness.<sup>2</sup> One such reference allows readers to know that the story takes place some time before 1985, when Bill C-13 amended the 1876 Indian Act, so that a Native woman who married a non-Native man no longer lost treaty status for herself and her children. In the narrative, the Horse Capture family moves off the Standoff reservation and into Calgary after the mother, Rose, has married a non-Native man. Will recalls some boyhood friends teasing him and his brother James with the taunt, “You guys have to live in town ‘cause you’re not Indian any more” (9). Suggestive phrasing here conveys a satirical tone, criticizing the notion that a law can deprive one of one’s cultural identity. This satirical perspective is stressed by Thomas King in his 2003 Massey lecture, where he describes the history of colonial legislation as the effort “to relieve us of our land” and “to legalize us out of existence” (*Truth* 130). The point about Will’s identity being deformed by non-Native law is reiterated when Will is denied a loan from the Department of Indian Affairs because he is a non-status Indian (99).

The metaphor of talk serves not only to explain the aesthetic of the novel’s poetic diction but also to illuminate its narrative structure. In each chapter, the narrative loops between past and present episodes, until a series of interconnected meanings is established between past and present. This looping structure is perfectly represented by the metaphor of talk, which always finds a balance between progressing to new topics and looping back on old ones with a new and greater understanding. As Robert Dale Parker argues, “talk brings out the conversational mix of linear and circular” that is used as a structural device in *Medicine River* (162). Each chapter’s looping between past and present episodes is balanced by a closing that links the past and present parts of the chapter thematically, thus striking a balance between circularity and linearity. In poetic phrasings at the end of each chapter, the reader senses that Will is not simply talking to him or her; rather, some more poetic inner voice has taken over, almost as if the voice of Will’s subconscious were able to speak through his conscious self to the reader. Just as the subconscious speaks to us in an unexplained language of dream images, these passages of heightened lyricism often convey symbolic phrasings that go unexplained by Will and have to be deciphered by the reader.

Chapter seventeen, about boating and canoeing misadventures, past and present, closes with this lyrical sentence: “And we brought the canoe back through the dark water and into the light” (248). The sentence



brings some linear focus to the chapter's looping of past and present tense narratives. The past tense episodes are about a childhood accident when the boys' mother Rose took them rowing on Lake Pokagon; the present tense ones are about Harlen and Will's canoeing mishap. The poetic conclusion of the chapter, about emerging from the dark water into the light, may suggest the survival of Aboriginal individuals and the cultural tenacity of Aboriginal peoples in colonial settings. Going beyond these tentative implications, the reader may be tempted to over-determine this lyrical phrase by identifying dark water with evil and light water with good, etc. The text contains an implicit warning against such excessive signification by noting that, on the realistic level of the scene, the sun has simply dipped behind a cloud. A realistic natural image is used to advise an immersion in the flow of the narrative as a necessary defense against the over-construction of meaning.

Chapter nine, which intertwines past-tense stories about Will's failure to connect with his own father and present-tense stories about his ineffective efforts to be a father figure to Clyde Whiteman, ends with Will visiting Clyde in prison, and watching Clyde make a jump shot in the prison gym. The chapter closes with this evocative sentence: "I watched as the ball left his hands and arched smoothly towards the hoop, spinning backwards as it dipped over the lip of the rim and fell tangling in the chains" (133). The final poetic phrase, "tangling in the chains," suggests ironies that ripple outward to include both the present-tense and past-tense stories of the chapter. In the present tense, this phrase suggests the mitigating social circumstances that diminish Clyde's happiness and derail his basketball talent; also, the pain of Will's failed efforts to be a father figure to Clyde. In the past tense, the phrase suggests the deeper reasons for this failure: the absence of Will's own father from his life, with its attendant losses of personal and cultural identity. The earlier part of the chapter's final sentence, focusing on the perfect jump shot, suggests either a wistful what-might-have-been or a hopeful what-might-yet-be in the lives of Clyde and Will.

The narrative is as unresolved as Will's homecoming to his Black-foot culture; as incomplete as Will taking a walk in the snow to end the novel; as uncertain as the low-lying winter sun above Medicine River; as imperfect as the awkwardly wrapped spinning top that Will gives to South Wing in the novel's final episode (261). Yet the narrative's symmetry is also emphasized by some clear contrasts, for, in becoming a father figure

to South Wing, Will accomplishes what his father failed to do. In the opening chapter, Will's absent non-Native father promises but fails to mail spinning tops to his two sons; then, in the novel's second-last paragraph, Will wraps up a musical top of the same kind for South Wing. Moreover, since the top is in the shape of a "perfect circle" with four quadrants, its shape suggests the medicine wheel (Bopp 19), evoking the spiritual dimension of Will's homecoming to his Blackfoot culture. Imperfection is balanced by perfection, just as lack of closure is balanced by finality. The narrative's unresolved loops are balanced by repeated uses of key poetic phrasings, which bring some fairly clear symmetries and thus some limited sense of closure to the narrative. Louise says, "You understand, don't you, Will?" near the novel's beginning (42); then, on the novel's second-last page, she declares, "You understand me" (260). Both statements convey the message that she requires a certain comfortable distance from Will. Comically and poignantly, Will's reticence has met its complement in Louise's independence. Yet the statements have very different tones: the first is far more quizzical and uncertain; the last is a peaceful and satisfied confirmation.

King has written about Native narrative as employing a "flat narrative line that ignores the ubiquitous climaxes and resolutions that are so valued in non-Native literature" ("Godzilla" 14). A similar point is made by Paula Gunn Allen, who argues that American Indian literature "does not rely on conflict, crisis, and resolution for organization" (59). The unresolved circling narrative structure of *Medicine River* is one of its aesthetic strengths, but one that requires close reading, for it is easier to spot an obvious climax than to remain constantly aware of the narrative's shifting uses of the linear and the circular.

The narrative makes one final unresolved and easily ignored loop on the second-last page of the novel. The "goofy guy" called "Howard Webster" in some of his mother's stories of Will's childhood (127) returns surreptitiously when Harlen invites Will to dinner at his sister's place. Harlen says, "You know Howard Webster. He married Annie Non-Native-man. Real goofy guy. He's going to be there too" (258). Through carefully repeated phrasing, the text gives an enigmatic clue that Will's father may still be alive. Will's mother Rose's story that his father had died in a car accident may have been a fiction, fabricated in order for her to move on from that painful absence in her life.<sup>3</sup> This possibility lends an entirely different tone to the entire narrative. It suggests a willful self-deception

and/or a painful effort to forgive. It gives the reader a specific reason for the painful slowness of Will's integration into the Blackfoot community. Such small verbal details are sprinkled throughout the novel and suggest an emotionally powerful lack of closure that is well evoked by the aesthetic of talk, reminding the reader that careful listening and observation are needed to discover these hints of meaning in subtle phrasings. In talk, important things are said quickly and may be missed.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In his Massey lectures, King uses the same technique, alternating stories about culture and history with those about individuals. A number of his personal stories, about his absent Cherokee father, his oppressed pre-feminist mother, etc., interweave the levels of personal and cultural commitment. King's "Native narrative" employs a number of fictional techniques that he used in his first novel, creating a fictional self that is very close to, but not identical with, the actual Thomas King.

<sup>2</sup> In addition to those named within the text of this article, a partial list of factual references (not including the numerous ideological ones) includes those to the reservation, the band council, the Friendship Centre, the American Indian Movement, the Wounded Knee confrontation, the sun dance, the hoop dance, the hand game, and to Napi or "old man," the Blackfoot version of the Trickster.

<sup>3</sup> King's own Cherokee father was absent from his childhood. In his Massey lectures, he admits to believing the story he preferred to believe, that his father left because he hated him and that his mother stayed because she loved him (25). Our choice, deliberate or conscious or not, of the stories we want to believe, on both personal and cultural levels, is a key theme in both *Medicine River* and *The Truth About Stories*.

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