Narrating History and Myth: Trickster Discourse in Thomas King’s “The One About Coyote Going West”

Deeply conscious of their long history of colonial marginalisation, Canada’s contemporary Aboriginal literatures speak from within an intensely politicised space, whose message is necessarily one that questions the production of cultural discourse and its functioning within the context of power relations. Native Canadian writers such as Tomson Highway, Lee Maracle, Jeanette Armstrong and Thomas King pursue an aesthetic agenda which directs the literary scholarship’s attention to the growing social awareness of the extent to which Canada’s Aboriginal cultures have been historically affected by the imperialist ideologies of the discourse of power that have been forming the mainstream society’s notions of Native communities. Read from the post-colonial perspective, therefore, Native Canadian literature reveals the capacity of minority narratives to explore the tensions of the centre/margin relationship and to disrupt the authority of colonial discourse by appropriating its linguistic medium to communicate the knowledges of cultural experience with, in Homi Bhabha’s terms, “forms of ‘native’ knowledges” (Bhabha 1994, 115) that destabilise Euro-centric hierarchical constructions.

In this respect, Native trickster narratives, which shape most of Thomas King’s works, operate as a powerful discursive strategy that enables the writer to expose the inconsistencies of official historical discourse and to fracture the coherence of Euro-centric epistemology. To adopt Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin’s words, King’s trickster narratives create “two audiences and [face] two directions, wishing to reconstitute experience through an act of writing which uses the tools of one culture or society and yet seeks to remain faithful to the experience of another” (The Empire, 59).

This double-edged impulse of King’s trickster narratives also manifests the complexity of ethnic boundaries in Canada’s social space dominated by the politics of Multiculturalism, where binary oppositions supposedly disintegrate in favour of the celebration of difference. The difference, however, remains
a fraudulent term, for as narratives assume, in Blanca Chester’s words, “a common matrix of cultural knowledge” (Chester, 55), its divergent elements undergo the process of exclusion to become signifiers of the ultimate Other. In effect, then, the production of this ethnic Other, as implied in the history of North American colonisation, is what spins the choreography of King’s trickster discourse, which is simultaneously a claim of resistance against reductive dichotomies of ethnic primitivism vs. civilisation and an assertion of cultural difference as the basis of communal experience.

The present paper takes up some of the concepts of post-colonial theory in an attempt to read Thomas King’s short story “The One About Coyote Going West” as a trickster narrative that uses Native cosmogonic myth to undermine the assumptions of colonial history and to ironise Western teleological narrative mode. By way of juxtaposing the Native tradition of oral storytelling and Western reliance on written discourse, King questions the legitimacy of Western culture’s hegemonic map-making practice and ridicules the stereotypes of Indians which have been fashioned by colonial mentality and established in official historical discourse. “The One About Coyote Going West”, therefore, may be read in terms of post-colonial resistant narratives, which challenge the dominant paradigms of Euro-centred cultural supremacy and reaffirm the power of indigenous voices.

Myth lies at the core of Native Canadian narrative tradition. As a literary mode which is based on the medium of oral storytelling and communal sharing, Native myth (or rather its postmodern use) carries out the potential of what Linda Hutcheon calls “a discursive community”, one that acknowledges the “constraints of discursive contexts […] [and] particularities […] of all […] micropolitical groupings in which we place ourselves […] [in] our society” (Hutcheon 1995, 92). In other words, for Native Canadian writers, the narrative exploration of mythological archives becomes both an aesthetic and political tool that enables Native Canadian literature to reveal the often uncomfortable intersections of class, race, gender, ethnicity, religion and other terms that construct social collectivities in the process of literary text reception. The use of myth in contemporary Native Canadian fiction, therefore, highlights the socio-political dimension of the dialogue dynamics between the text and its reader, inviting the latter to inspect the boundaries of the multiple contexts of his/her own identity.

The fiction of Thomas King shows a particular knowledge of the range of narrative strategies provided by the postmodern exploration of Native
Narrating History and Myth: Trickster Discourse in Thomas King’s “The One About Coyote Going West”

mythology. His novel *Green Grass, Running Water* (1994) employs variations on the Native earth-diver creation myth and posits them against the biblical creation story and the colonial images of Natives as portrayed in Western literary canon to displace the rigid authority of the Euro-Canadian cultural framework. Similarly, by way of juxtaposing Native oral storytelling and Euro-Canadian written discourse in his short stories “A Coyote Columbus Story” and “The One About Coyote Going West”, King ridicules the epistemological limits of Western ethnocentrism and the imperialist ideology of colonial history in North America, which has shaped the dominant perceptions of Native cultures. As Carlton Smith points out, “[…] we – as readers – when confronting King’s beguiling narrative are collectively redefined and […] made aware of the political nature of representation and all ‘cultural accounts’” (Smith, 1).

Much like *Green Grass, Running Water*, the narrative of “The One About Coyote Going West” operates on two levels. While converging oral storytelling with written discourse, it frames a Native cosmogonic myth within a story about trickster Coyote, who comes to talk to the narrator about the creation of Indians: “I been reading about that history, says Coyote. She sticks that nose back in my tea. All about who found us Indians” (King 1996, 234). A mythological creator-figure, King’s Coyote refers to the cyclical nature of the mythical time as parallel to that of storytelling: “I’m going to see my friends, she says. Tell those stories. Fix this world. Straighten it up” (King 1996, 234). Therefore, as King’s story adopts the trickster’s logic and rejects the linear narrative pattern, emphasising its dialogical nature instead, it projects itself as a cosmogonic act, a textual experience of world-creation, in which the writer and the reader find themselves ever present and participating.

While the trickster’s intentions to “fix the world” establish a mythical chronotope, which alludes to the recreation of the Universe and the conception of Indians, they also run in parallel to the historical perspective of colonisation. The very title of “The One About Coyote Going West” implicitly suggests a reference to the US imperialist ideology of Manifest Destiny, which was fashioned as a justification of the American expansion to the West and the occupying of Native lands. Thus by focusing on the issue of the creation of Indians, the narrative space of King’s story merges historical discourse with myth to expose the Western hegemonic practice of history-making, in which Indians are constructed much in the spirit of Edward Said’s notion of Orientalism as “a systematic discipline by which European
culture was able to manage […] the Orient politically, […] militarily, ideologically […] and imaginatively […]” (Said, 3).

When King’s trickster Coyote tells the narrator that she had been reading history books about who found Indians, she invites the reader to reconsider the colonial rationale behind the representations of Native Peoples in official historical discourse. Postmodern trickster narrative blends myth with historiography and thereby ironises the production of knowledge in the colonial project:

Maybe I tell you the one about Eric the Lucky and the Vikings play hockey for the Oldtimers find us Indians in Newfoundland, she says. Maybe I tell you the one about Christopher Cartier looking for something good to eat. Find us Indians in a restaurant in Montreal. Maybe I tell you the one about Jacques Columbus come along that river. Indians waiting for him. We all wave and say, here we are, here we are (King 1996, 234).

Through a subtle game of linguistic misplacement King parodies the rhetoric of colonial institutions that shaped the official versions of the “discovery” of North America, in which Indians notably featured as “barbarians” and “savages”. The extract’s ironic effect destabilises the hierarchy of the relations of power, since, as Hutcheon has noted: “In the economy of exchange that we call irony, there is always a power imbalance […] because irony is simultaneously disguise and communication” (Hutcheon 1995, 95). Irony unites at the same time as it marginalises. The ironic gesture of the story, therefore, invokes a sense of common knowledge, which is shared and reaffirmed as the hallmark of a discursive community.

Granted King’s fervent engagement in the challenging of what Marlene Goldman calls “the colonial tales of progress” (Goldman, 30), Coyote in “The One About Coyote Going West” operates as a symbolic medium of the native voice, which projects a self-reflexive commentary on North American history as an ideological construct and a product of an anthropological agenda. Thus the mythical layer of the story serves as a metanarrative to its historical sub-text, simultaneously re-establishing the historical topos and subverting it through retroaction, which, as Bhabha points out, has the “ability to reinscribe the past, reactivate it, relocate it, resignify it” (Bhabha 1998, 35).
Narrating History and Myth: Trickster Discourse in Thomas King's “The One About Coyote Going West”

The Janus-faced chronotope of “The One About Coyote Going West” is communicated through the semiotic structures of trickster discourse. A mischievous androgynous character, Coyote acts as the controlling consciousness of the story. The trickster merges history with myth and appears as a repository of cultural knowledge, which emphasises her ancient role as a “culture-bringer” (Campbell, 273) and preserver. Coyote is also the constructive force of the dialogical nature of the narrative: it is to her that the narrator recounts the story of the creation of Indians. In fact, the narrator here operates as the trickster’s alter ego: an androgynous mediator, s/he negotiates between Coyote and the reader just like Coyote mediates between the realms of nature and culture in Native mythology. In effect, then, within the post-colonial framework, this mediation between binary oppositions may be read as the text’s resistance against imposed authoritarian hierarchies, for as Chester aptly notes, “Coyote’s nature is one that repudiatesessentialism: [s]he has the power to change things around, to transform reality and [her]/himself, in ways that are limited only by [her]/his imaginative abilities to conjure up stories” (Chester, 56).

The repudiation of essentialism turns us back to the context of Western metaphysics and its obsession with the notion of the arche, which in the story “The One About Coyote Going West” becomes an object of inquiry for both mythology and history. King posits the emergence of Native Peoples at the intersection between history and cosmogony and narrates a parody of a creation myth where he exposes the ways in which historical discourse adopts the colonial perspective and mythologises colonisers, such as Christopher Columbus and Jacques Cartier, identifying them as the first “archeologists” of Native cultures. For King, Native myth serves as a powerful critique of colonial ideology, which has attempted to erase Aboriginal cultures in the process of colonisation as imperialist creation myth:

Ho, I says. You are trying to bite my toes. Everyone knows who found us Indians. Eric the Lucky and that Christopher Cartier and that Jacques Columbus come along later. Those ones get lost. Float about. Walk around. Get mixed up. Ho, ho, ho, those ones cry; we are lost. So we got to find them. Feed them. Show them around. Boy, I says. Bad mistake that one (King 1996, 234).

The parodying effort of the story disables the imperialist gaze of historical cliches and undercuts any conventional assumptions of the “objectivity” of history. For as Hutcheon has pointed out in her Poetics of Postmodernism,
“The reader is forced to acknowledge not only the inevitable textuality of our knowledge of the past, but also both the value and the limitations of the inescapably discursive form of that knowledge” (Hutcheon 2003, 127).

The production of historical knowledge is one of the key issues Thomas King discusses in his fiction. His novel *Green Grass, Running Water* features four Native mythological characters, each of whom not only narrates her own creation myth, but also participates in the canonical texts of history and Western literature, which serve as cultural intertexts of Western logocentrism and objects of Native postmodern parody. Again, myth is used as a critical tool that most effectively shows, in Patricia Linton’s words, “that history can be revisited, endings can be rewritten, the letter does not have to be the law” (Linton, 228). Likewise, in “A Coyote Columbus Story”, King addresses the historically canonised story of Columbus’s “discovery” of North America. What King offers here, though, is a reconsideration of the colonial beginnings through the prism of Native subjectivity, which is voiced by the trickster Coyote.

Much like “The One About Coyote Going West”, “A Coyote Columbus Story” challenges the authority of official historical discourse by providing a parodying reinterpretation of Columbus’s journey and demystifying his colonial map-making project. Whereas history presents Columbus as a hero, King portrays him as a greedy fool, who has lost his way to China and ends up asking Coyote for directions. The trickster, however, plays a naïve chord and invites him to play ball, to which Columbus responds by kidnapping a group of Indians as compensation for his trip. In the end, as Coyote becomes puzzled about who really found Indians, the story rounds up a cycle and comes back to its own beginning, thereby exposing the ideological limitations of historical narrative. As King notes, “Those things were never lost, I says. Those things were always here. Those things are still here today” (King 1993, 129).

The narrative of “The One About Coyote Going West” sets up a mythological framework as a hermeneutic lens through which it interprets its historical intertexts. King satirizes the historical circumstances of Columbus’ accidental “discovery” of North America as implied in Coyote’s desire to create the world:

Coyote was heading west. That’s how I always start this story. There was nothing else in the world. Just Coyote. She could see all the way,
Narrating History and Myth: Trickster Discourse in Thomas King’s
“The One About Coyote Going West”

too. No mountains then. No rivers then. No forests then. Pretty flat
then. So she starts to make things. So she starts to fix the world […]
The first thing Coyote makes, I tell Coyote, is a mistake (King 1996,
235).

King’s reference to Coyote’s mistake could be seen as ironising Columbus’
historical blunder in his search for the passage to India, which started off the
colonisation of North America and gave rise to the ideological paradigm of
the representations of Native Americans in European historical narratives.
Through the parodying gesture of world-creation as mistake, King’s Coyote
interrupts the coherence of colonial history and destabilises its narrative
expertise. Read from the post-colonial perspective, therefore, trickster Coyote
carries out the promise of Native agency, which Ashcroft, Griffiths and
Tiffin define as “[…] the ability of post-colonial subjects to initiate action
in engaging or resisting imperial power” (Post-Colonial, 8).

The reference to Coyote’s world-creation mistake may also be indicative of
the Native Peoples’ post-colonial agency as seen through its intertextual
critique of the Genesis story, in which the Judeo-Christian God is a faultless
creator of the Universe, an idea that lies at the foundation of the Christian
theological doctrine. The idea of the creation mistake recurs in King’s
Green Grass, Running Water as well. In fact, the novel starts with an
ironic dialogue between Coyote and his dream, which calls itself god. The
code of parody here displaces the patriarchal order imposed on the novel’s
Native female characters by a rigid Christian belief system, which provides
moral justification for the colonial agenda. As Sharon Bailey notes, “By
placing the creation of God after the creation of Coyote, the narrator
has already displaced Christianity from its position of Ultimate Truth”
(Bailey, 3).

The making of a cosmogonic mistake in “The One About Coyote Going
West” also implicitly refers to the Genesis story, urging us to reconsider the
epistemological limits of Western theological discourse. King ironises the
eschatological concerns of the Christian doctrine by replacing them with
scatological humour: “So that silly one thinks real hard and tries to sing out
her butt hole. Psst! Psst! That is what that butt hole says, and right away
things don’t smell so good in that hole” (King 1996, 236). As trickster
Coyote subverts the spiritual topography of Christian theology, she also
dismantles the Western hierarchy of values, producing instead a liberating
narrative in the fashion of Rabelaisian carnivalesque, where, according to
Mikhail Bakhtin, “Laughter and the material bodily element, as a degrading and regenerating principle, played an essential role in […] festivities held outside […] the church […]” (Bakhtin, 79). Thus the carnivalesquian character of King’s trickster narrative shapes an alternative ideological framework, in which the Western logos gets decentred in its dialogue with Native cultural signifiers.

While problematising the social receptions of Native cultural discourse prevalent in Canada’s Anglo-Celtic majority, Thomas King’s story “The One About Coyote Going West” uses Coyote as a mythological trickster figure that disrupts the inflexibility of Western narrative patterns and conventional categories of world-perception. The Coyote of King’s postmodern parody emerges as an ambivalent narrative consciousness which transgresses the binary notions of the logic of myth and escapes the dichotomies employed in anthropological accounts. However, the trickster’s cosmogonic act bears a double edge as it simultaneously merges written history with the orality of myth and undercuts the presumptive superiority of the former over the latter.

In her Poetics of Postmodernism, Linda Hutcheon observes that postmodern writers engaged in the rewriting of history use parodying strategies

[…] not only to restore history and memory in the face of the distortions of the “history of forgetting”, but also, at the same time, to put into question the authority of any act of writing by locating the discourses of both history and fiction within an ever-expanding intertextual network that mocks any notion of either single origin or simple causality (Hutcheon 2003, 129).

Thomas King’s trickster narrative also shows the writer’s acute awareness of the ideological implications of writing practice and the artificiality of simplified causal relationships. To counteract the Western teleological mode of progressive narration, the creation process in “The One About Coyote Going West” emerges as a never-ending story, in which the creator figure (Coyote) has no actual control over the world: “I’ve made four things already, she says. I got to have help” (King 1996, 239). As the trickster’s alter ego, the narrator makes constant narrative shifts and personal remarks about the story’s mythological characters, thereby refusing to produce any authoritative version of the myth of cultural origins.
Narrating History and Myth: Trickster Discourse in Thomas King’s “The One About Coyote Going West”

In fact, the conception of Indians, which has been a pivotal concern of the story, proves to be a self-generated inception rather than Coyote’s creative act. Tired of waiting for the creation of Indians, the story’s ducks transform themselves into Indians:

   By golly, says those four ducks. We got more ducks than we need. I guess we got to be the Indians. And so they do that. Before Coyote or that big mistake can mess things up, those four ducks turn into Indians, two women and two men. Good-looking Indians, too. They don’t look at all like ducks any more (King 1996, 240).

For King, the conception of Indians is a political issue, which assumes the shared knowledge of the history of colonisation and social marginalisation of Native communities through the dominant majority’s repressive institutions of power in North America. Therefore, the act of mythical metamorphosis in the story “The One About Coyote Going West” may be read as the writer’s resistance against the discursive practices of Western anthropology, which often rely on the mastermind of historical discourse in their representation/“creation” of Indians for the general readership. Ultimately, the cosmogonic nature of the transformational act obstructs the dynamics of the centre/margin relationship, articulating an alternative system of knowledge, one in which Native Canadians appear as the subjects of enunciation rather than the objects of representation.

The aesthetics of trickster narrative in Thomas King’s story “The One About Coyote Going West” embraces a wide range of issues that fall within the scope of contemporary literary theory and criticism. By way of constructing a semiotic space of postmodern parody, it demystifies the authority of the totalizing narratives of the past, exposing the ideological constraints of official historical discourse and Western conventional notions of culture. The story blends history with myth to emphasise the textual nature of the production of history and invites the reader to reconsider his/her own reading practices in the face of a text that challenges the traditional assumptions of narration. Above all, as King resorts to the creative energy of the Native tradition of oral storytelling and asserts the value of the Native collective memory, he also claims a narrative space for the identity of the Aboriginal cultures of North America; the space that carries the competence of colonial legacy, but only as a promise of creative transformation and socio-political change.
Works Cited


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