

ISSN 1751-8229

Volume Seven, Number Three

When the Trickster Meets ‘the big Other’ Coyote Goes Cosmic

Linda Revie, Red Deer College, Canada.

Coyote in the Garden

In the traditional oral literature from Aboriginal North America, the First Beings, often depicted as supernatural “re-creators” like Coyote or Raven, are separate incarnations from the first humans. Where Indigenous figures are seen as a central component of the trickster mode of storytelling, in the theological, scientific or philosophic discourses coming out of the West, the “Indian” is never placed in the esteemed position of originator of the world, or of the beings that populate it. Conversely, in trickster narratives, the world often begins with a conversation between the re-creator and the “Indians,” after which the White race is brought into existence – a moment marked by planetary turmoil, ecological crisis, and spiritual distress. Because trickster narratives privilege the “Indian” and other recreations of aboriginality, many Indigenous writers using the discourse find important strategies for strengthening nationalist causes.¹ This occurs in “The One about Coyote Going West” and “This is a Story” when Thomas King and Jeannette Armstrong deploy the trickster to tackle contemporary problems caused by the hegemonic racist and colonizing contexts.² In these tales about Coyote heading West/Kyoti in the West, the

authors also ingeniously weave into the trickster mode of storytelling “borrowed” literary and aesthetic forms from the dominant culture. Their celebrations of Coyote/Kyoti as re-creator of the world and of humanity reposition the “Indian” in relation to other racialized characters and in so doing, contest Western ideas about creation, colonization, and ethnicity.

Thomas King uses a pan-Indigenous perspective to challenge established myths of racial superiority. Borrowing from a range of stories inside and outside his tribal pantheon, King has Coyote creating the White race first. This “Mistake” is followed by the emergence of four Indigenous characters that wreak havoc and fail to fix the world. Alternatively, Jeannette Armstrong, working with an epistemology that is intrinsically linked to her community, takes on aspects of race science’s theory of degeneration. Contrasting the tension between sedentary and migratory cultures, Armstrong problematizes the complex historical negotiation between Western and Aboriginal land usage which in turn highlights some of the difficulties about defining/dismantling “the system.” As both authors show, tricksters can exercise extraordinary power, but in the end, is the hegemony subverted through these actions, or is cycle of racism, destruction and victimization merely renewed through a repositioned cast of characters?

Slavoj Žižek’s theorizing about racial/cultural identities provides a useful lens to read these stories and answer many of the questions raised by them. In *The Ticklish Subject*, Žižek pushes for a new decolonizing framework for the human condition that goes beyond trying to re-create or reposition race and racialized beings. His work is important to the discussions prominent in these trickster narratives because it falls outside the canonical framework that determines who speaks about identity, colonization and race. Žižek’s writings move away from essentializing race, or from offering an “othered” point of view, by demanding that questions of identity be thought of in relation to the capitalist realities that valorize notions of subjectivity and agency. His work also allows one to think about the nature of freedom in the context of capitalism, especially how safe, marketable “otherness” is tolerated within national discourse. In this regard, King’s and Armstrong’s stories, which bring Aboriginal cultural knowledges into Western research spaces, do so in a benign saleable way that does not disrupt wider dominant nationalist discourse because they were both printed and distributed by the mainstream Canadian publishing house McClelland and Stewart; they are composed in English; they are written (rather than oral³); they are grounded in Euro-western literary and aesthetic forms; and they are aimed at a broad audience.

While Žižek’s work may stand at a distance from most Aboriginal and post-colonial scholarship, it does focus on identity theories, and many cultural studies critics use his writing to analyze subjects “disposable” to national narratives. In particular, one could look at a recent

article by Tara Atluri, "Mild Curry, Mildly Queer: India, Sex, and Slavoj Žižek," published in 2010 in *International Journal of Žižek Studies*. Although Atluri focusses on India, and on homosexuality, her application of Žižek's theorizing about the dissident/terrorist and the capitalist state provides useful scaffolding. Of course, this paper works with completely different sources (both primary and secondary) but follows some of Atluri's maneuvers to do a Žižekian analysis of Aboriginal identity politics within the Canadian post-colonial/capitalist context. The essay begins by outlining Thomas King's trickster narrative and his critical agenda for the politics and poetics of Indigenous identity-making. Then it moves to an examination of Aboriginal literary and nationalist epistemologies that promote writing "with a sense of Indigenous consciousness" (Ortiz 2006: xiv) and uses Žižek to problemize how this "new nationalism" theorizing might weaken, rather than strengthen, discourses of identity and race. Next, it works with a critique of the politics of subjectivity. Using Žižek's theorizing, it argues that a broader framework -- opposed to cultural, geopolitical and historical specificities of tribe/community -- must provide the overarching narrative for such identity based claims. Turning to Jeannette Armstrong's tale, the paper relies on her critical discussions of the politics and poetics of Indigeneity to examine her story and trace the way Aboriginal identity-making loses radical political currency when her writing speaks the language of binaries and dichotomies, and reinscribes the hegemony's race-based system of identification. Finally, using Žižek's insights into "the Void of subjectivization" to discuss how one must be cognizant of merely subverting, or re-ordering, a hierarchy of origins/power/identity along another racialist axis, the paper concludes with a Žižekian search for a new circuitry outside the modality of "the big Other."⁴ Ultimately, it claims that Žižek's theorizing re-energizes the trickster stories' foundations, makes visible contradictions, and ultimately shape-shifts their frames beyond the hierarchies, antagonisms and scales of worth of the established -- or the deconstructed -- order. But before one witnesses this Žižekian re-energization, it is important to begin by profiling the authors Thomas King and Jeannette Armstrong in order to trace the ways they are influenced by the epistemological field of race theory and examine how subversive the writings are when they realign Aboriginality in relation to Eurocentric race science.

Pan-Indianism and Thomas King

Thomas King's "The One About Coyote Going West" offers up an Aboriginal version of the creation of the world and critiques the Eurocentric notion commonly referred to as The Myth of Progress. King, born in 1943 in Roseville, California, has different strands to his ancestry,

namely Cherokee, Greek, and German, but he identifies as Aboriginal (Cherokee). In terms of tribal specificities, King's California upbringing makes him an "Outland" Cherokee; that is, someone "raised outside the geopolitical and cultural boundaries of the established Cherokee communities of northeastern Oklahoma, western Arkansas and western North Carolina" (Justice 2006: xvi). King's education and faculty positions took him away from home and land base too: after moving to Canada in 1980, he has worked at the University of Lethbridge in Alberta and the University of Guelph in Ontario, teaching Aboriginal literature and creative writing.

King explores the complexities of his identity when he states: "With my looks ... I could have gone either way ... I wouldn't define myself as an Indian in the same way that someone living on a reserve would. That whole idea of 'Indian' becomes, in part, a construct."⁵ Embracing a pan-Indigenous ontology, King "constructs" an Outland identity for his characters too. This affect is obvious in his choice of trickster, as he works with a Coyote instead of the more traditional Rabbit that inhabits Cherokee lore (Justice 2006: 158). It appears the Coyote influence comes from British Columbia-based Harry Robinson's (Okanagan) stories (Bennett and Brown 2002: 913). Another way the indigenous becomes "a construct" in King's work is in his choice of setting. According to critic and Aboriginal nationalist Daniel Heath Justice, King "Cherokee-izes" Canada's prairies – the province of Alberta in particular -- when he "roots his stories on the Blackfoot peoples...thereby subsuming local Indigenous narratives that have yet to be fully told" (158). Here "Cherokee-izing" may be thought of as both a celebration of the Aboriginal diaspora, and a unique literary contribution. Either way, the American-born Outland Cherokee's approach is out-of-sync with the new nationalism, especially the American Indian Literary Nationalism of Jace Weaver (Cherokee), Craig S. Womack (Creek) and Robert Warrior (Osage) which sets out to strengthen Aboriginal sovereignty and self-determination by rooting communities in their cultural, geopolitical, and historical specificities.

For King, the pan-Indigenous perspective is one of his rationales for writing: "[stories] recount relationships that help to define the nature of the universe and [help the] two cultures understand the world in which they exist" (*Truth* 2003: 10). Hence, it should not come as a surprise to read that the speaker in "The One About Coyote Going West" — a gender-ambiguous narrator — and the ambivalently gendered Coyote both set out to challenge assumptions about White vs. Aboriginal issues of identity and authority.⁶ According to King's own theoretical compass, this fits into the range of Indigenous writing he calls "polemical," that is, literature concerning itself with the clash of cultures (and not with the new nationalism's tribal and communal specificities). The framing of the story, offering a synthesis of oral and written traditions, makes the tale "interfusional" too ("Godzilla" 1997: 244). Reading about a narrator,

and Coyote, presiding over two loosely interwoven plots, we also get the speaker telling a story to Coyote about a Coyote who tries to change the system. Anishnabe literary critic Armand Garnet Ruffo considers this metafictional strategy a challenge to the writerly praxis of the West ("From Myth" 1995: 135). When the tale progresses, an understanding emerges that both Coyotes (the one hearing the story; the one in the story) are the same character on the same mission to fix the world. However, in relating these parallel narratives, storyteller takes his/her time and repeats things: sometimes to answer a question; or for emphasis; or as a delaying tactic; or to rearrange the plot. As Canadian critic Renate Eigenbrod argues in *Travelling Knowledges*, if the storyteller is interrupted the audience's role is highlighted, bringing European and Indigenous cultures into direct contact (2005: 169-70). Further, Stoh:lo writer Lee Maracle explains that the audience/listener/reader of a trickster narrative "is as much a part of the story as the teller" (1990: 11). The device of the narrator who constantly changes the direction of the tale, and the listener who is similarly involved in the undertaking, further underscores how King's approach to writing is as interfusional as it is polemical, that is, designed with "patterns, metaphors, structures as well as the themes and characters ... from oral literature ("Godzilla" 1997: 244).

On the level of plot, too, King's tale provides an Indigenous twist to the conventional Judeo-Christian narrative, especially when Coyote makes his/her first creation: "the Mistake." One could read the Mistake as a "Twin" figure common to Iroquoian trickster narratives (and therefore outside both the Cherokee tradition to which King claims relation and the Okanagan pantheon that he borrows from in this particular story). While Coyote and the Mistake do seem polemically opposed like the Twins (one wants the landscape to be neat and orderly; the other messes it up), the Mistake is created by Coyote and is not his/her sibling. As this paper goes on to argue, these characters are direct allegories of colonization and their states of being approximate Žižek's "subjectivization," the process through which individuals, deprived of their identities, are brought to the "Void" or "zero-point." Subjectivization occurs after a cataclysmic "Event" -- such as the moment of contact -- and the end result can be revolutionary enough to shift the existing socio-symbolic network into an alternative modality. Those directly involved in an Event are referred to as "engaged gazers" and "bearers of the Truth" (*Ticklish* 2008: 145-97), meaning the Coyote figure in King's trickster story can be considered one of Žižek's engaged Truth-bearers.

So King's tale promises to reveal "who found us Indians" (95) but this Event (colonization/contact) is not actually the climatic, or polemical, moment in the story. This shows consistency with the way King downplays the occupation of the Americas as the single-most

important reference point for Aboriginal peoples. In his critical discussion of post-colonialism, King argues that the binary resulting from focussing on contact leads to “before” and “after” moments, suggesting the Indigenous context has passed beyond (the Žižekian Void) or resolved the struggle between oppressor and oppressed (“Godzilla” 1997: 242). In fact, it might be argued that in the Coyote story, the construction of indigeneity – and not the process of subjectivization -- is the outcome of the Event, as the “Indians” that show up late in the tale are not brought to a zero-point of identity; instead, conscious and sentient, they emerge straight from “the land,” or rather from creatures already *in situ*. The interesting point for the story is that indigeneity is not “found” through contact, discovered by the Mistake, nor created by Coyote.⁷ Here we can appreciate King’s insistence that the “whole idea of Indian” really does become his self-determined “construct.”

Events in the Myth of Progress

The tale continues down the polemical/interfusal path set out by King, challenging the dominant tropes of colonization and race science, blending them with Coyote traditions. We see this occur through a series of twists and turns to the basic plotline of the Myth of Progress. Firstly, instead of tracing the White race as progressively rising above the Indigenous, the initial creation (the Mistake) wreaks havoc on the re-creator (Coyote) and on the world: “And that mistake grabs Coyote’s nose. And that one pulls off her mouth so she can’t sing. And that one jumps up and down on Coyote until she is flat. Then that one leaps out of that hole, wanders around looking for things to do” (“Coyote” 1990: 98). During this confrontation, the Aboriginal trickster has been silenced by his/her own creation. Described within is the grim reality of oppression and victimization too, but the chaos resolves itself when Coyote finds a different means of articulation and begins to speak from the anal orifice. The story’s subsequent focus on flatulence — what Anishnabe writer and literary scholar Gerald Vizenor calls “the comic fart effect ... [another] semiotic sign of trickster discourse” (1989: 191) — really makes Coyote the butt of the joke.

This character is not, ultimately, brought to the zero-point though, and the story does not end at the Void. In fact, Coyote continues on his/her journey “... looking for that one who is messing up the world” (102). Going on to critique other aspects of the Myth of Progress, the author sends Coyote toward the West, a place piled high in “stuff,” such as snow tires, televisions, vacuum cleaners, pastel sheets, humidifiers, barbecues, department store catalogues, computers, golf carts and golf balls (102). Here, the narrative links westward

expansion and material culture, showing colonization firmly grounded in the larger framework of capitalism. Of course, the tale suggests colonization and capitalism are unnatural Events in the history of the world, just as it also undermines Judeo-Christian ideas of the perfection of creation: “Oh no [Coyote] says, this mountain is all wrong. How come you’re so nice and round? Where are all those craggy peaks?” (101) This section of the text, a sustained critique of Eurocentric values, highlights another interesting Western presumption that links aesthetic judgement, westward expansion, and physical features, as Coyote believes the “nice and round” world full of too much stuff is so “wrong” it needs to be redesigned into something rough and imperfect. In the context of Indigenous epistemologies, these oppositions (aesthetical, capitalistic) might be used to support discourses of harmony and balance (as nothing is neat and orderly, as sometimes it is also bent and twisted). However, when Coyote ends up rejecting the nice round material world associated with the White mistake, and with the West -- a place described as “lopsided,” as containing too many of the wrong kinds of things – the story is not concluded with a trickster balancing act, and the big Other is not radically refigured. Instead, using the colonial allegory, the realm remains flawed and the trickster has not arrived at his/her destination in the West because “Indians” have not been created yet.

The Red, The White (The Blue and The Green)

The “Indians” (or rather, their progenitors) finally appear near the end of the story when four multicoloured ducks — symbols, perhaps, of four varieties of Homo sapiens described by Enlightenment philosopher Linnaeus – walk into the plot. The trickster attempts, unsuccessfully, to deceive the fowl into closing their eyes so s/he can eat them. However, these red, white, blue and green beings are not so easily fooled, or consumed, and instead of becoming Coyote’s next meal they lay eggs in colours different from themselves. Unlike the strict monogenetic laws laid out in the *Book of Genesis* though, they are able to introduce a new species when the coloured ducks and Coyote do a ritual song and dance⁸ around the eggs which hatch into more diversely-hued offspring. Then, the first birds (the original four) decide to “go Native.” Shape-shifting into two male and two female “duck-Indians,” these “constructs” turn out to be very unhappy with their cross-species/“feathered Indian” identities.⁹

What are we to make of the ducks (and those duck/feathered-Indians)? Cherokee critic Daniel Heath Justice, commenting on how often ducks occur in King’s work, argues the creatures are meant to “replace other spirit beings in various story retellings ... [to] realign the

narrative to King's pan-Indian perspective" (2006: 174). Also outside the Aboriginal pantheon to which the author claims relation, the four ducks are brought into existence only to "stomp on" the re-creator. While Coyote shrugs off the injury (again), the illusory nature of freedom in the context of colonialism and capitalism is highlighted when the cycle of oppression and victimization is renewed. The suggestion here is that Coyote has extraordinary power but all of his/her tribulations to rectify things have "flattened" him/her. This is the darker side of Coyote tales, when the harm caused, and disorder created, seems contrary to the balanced world view featured in King's native (Cherokee) philosophy (Justice 2006: 155). And since the narrator embedded in the Coyote tale emphasizes the chaos of a future Event, saying "I got to watch the sky" (106) for more stuff might fall, there's prophesy beneath those last words, and throughout the tale an ambiguous (funny?) lesson that retains its hold on the hegemonic order by its repetitive re-enacting of violence and victimization.

Having a Good Belly Laugh?

It is this paper's intention to move away from documenting the devastation that followed colonization, or from offering "spectacles" of the Other as victimized, violent or "outlandish." Instead, this argument intends to explore conditions beyond these boundaries (of colonization, of race). Can one find a broader frame of identity-making within other epistemologies that inform Aboriginal poetics and politics? Perhaps the story's whimsy and humour offers such a rich interplay. Drew Hayden Taylor (Anishnabe) thinks so. He argues that Coyote tales are comedies and their themes and characters offer up a form of "permitted disrespect" — Aboriginal peoples' permission "to make fun ... to have a good belly laugh" ("Laughing" 2005: 209). Taylor also suggests comedy helps non-Indigenous readers get Aboriginal jokes by tricking White audiences into figuring out their own biases for themselves.¹⁰ Other critics, notably Renée Hulan and Linda Warley, contend that Coyote humour resists the ideological dogma of the dominant order because it responds to the third cultural mode King labels "associational," that is, created to avoid conflicts between the two cultures (2002: 130). And finally, Kristina Fagan (Labrador-Metis Nation) believes the humour offered up in Coyote tales has a radical intention and is not designed to educate Westerners, or avoid conflicts, at all. In "Teasing, Tolerating, Teaching" Fagan claims that Aboriginal peoples' oft-times violent jokes about themselves enforce their own moral and social order (2005: 35).¹¹ In any case, whether the humour is polemical, interfusional, associational, a "permitted disrespect," or a reinforcement of the status quo, in "The One About Coyote Going West" a paradox is operating.

Even if the characters stomp on each other because it is funny, or because it provides an educational opportunity, King ends up “talking the same old talk” about an Indigenous world of disorder, victimhood, and abuse, and this rhetoric reintegrates the othered body back into racist discourse. This paper will not talk about how that might exemplify another tendency of trickster writing in that the act of first displacing the fundamental contours of discourse through humour and then reasserting the order of established relations is itself conceived of as a destabilization of the power structure. That debate invites the othered to forget the violence of the state and fetishize a kind of power (Coyote Power!) through a discourse of subversion and disruption. It also begs the question: if indigeneity is a matter of simply making fun of/subverting the dominant narrative, doesn't it cease to be “Indigenous”?

As Žižek's writing implies, every subversion of power remains entrenched in the very matrix it seems to oppose, and endless mocking, parody, and provocation will not undermine the logic of the big Other. Therefore, it is not productive to read King through post-colonialist, polemical or humour lenses, and elevate the literature into a so-called site of resistance. Similarly, using Weaver, Womack, Warrior and Justice to argue Aboriginal nationalism is also not going to reframe this story because King's pan-Indigenous approach has him borrowing from traditions outside the specific geographic community to which he claims relation, and that “hybridized” approach to writing is out-of-synch with the new nationalists' agenda. On the other hand, Žižek's theory of transgressive creativity can find useful application here as it offers a new constellation outside the boundaries of colonization, nationalism and race that is meant to be liberatory for all humans, not just one racial, cultural, or geopolitical group.

In Žižekian terms, when King concludes “The One About Coyote Going West” close to the zero-point of subjectivization, but not at -- or beyond -- the Void, the goal has yet to be achieved (i.e. nobody has arrived “West”), the world that Coyote set out to fix is still flawed, and the narrator has to watch the sky for “falling things that land in piles” (106). This is, of course, a capitalist dilemma, linked here to colonization and identity. For the state needs characters who are always *en route*; who are seeking out the re-creator; who may -- or may not — arrive; who may — or may not — acquire too much “stuff.” These not-yet-emergent subjects (communities and nations) do not change in any way the flaws with the world, or the distribution of power, goods and identities. Does this tale of violence, victimization, abuse and survival even suggest there is a “West,” inhabited by Raven and “Indians” (who are not unhappy; who are not partly fowl)? Here King “leaves the reference empty,” presenting what Žižek calls “an opening of the possibility of participating in some moment of Cosmic retribution” (*Ticklish* 2008: 147, 162).

Since one trickster narrative always stands in relation to every other (Ridington 2000: 95), the gap or hiatus at the end of “The One About Coyote Going West” awaits a different treatment. Turning to Armstrong’s post-contact tale which describes a trickster who has definitely arrived West, the paper focusses on the subjectivization of “Indians” through an Event that heralds in a potential New Subjectivity. To trace its emergence, attention is given to the tale’s moment of Truth, read as a Žižekian “transubstantiation”; that is, a shift toward retribution on a Cosmic scale.

A Transubstantiation

A galactic Event at the beginning of “This is a Story” links Jeannette Armstrong’s tale with Thomas King’s and points to a new circuitry outside the modality of the big Other. Armstrong opens with a narrator who is also fixated on the sky. Unlike King’s warning in his Coyote story to watch for “falling things that land in piles” (106), Armstrong’s speaker anticipates seeing a Red Star that has reportedly come close to planet Earth (“Story” 1990: 129). She then goes on to describe how Whites are still destroying the world, and sends Kyoti on a mission to fix it. Like a post-script to King’s piece, we move into a period of post-colonization which sees the next generations of Indigenous peoples “out West” thoroughly contaminated by White culture. Armstrong’s tale is set within a particular late twentieth-century context, when British Columbia’s Okanagan River was dammed and polluted. In the author’s opinion, it has been one big mistake after another, but this tale is not related in a dark, edgy, humorous tone. Instead, Armstrong’s narrator, who decides to talk rather than nap, settles on a more moralizing mode about a trickster who has just woken up from that coveted sleep. It turns out time-warp Kyoti had earned his rest: he only retired after destroying the first dams built by the “Monsters” (associated with Whites and in particular, with eighteenth-century Hudson Bay Company employees). Now that the “Swallows” (associated with modern settlers) have blocked fish migrations by building the McIntyre Dam near Oliver, British Columbia, Kyoti needs to affect a miracle and bring the salmon back to the People.

Jeannette C. Armstrong was born in 1948 in the Okanagan, on the Penticton Indian Reserve in British Columbia, Canada. Her family claims relation to Okanagan author Mourning Dove (1888-1936), a great-aunt who instilled in Armstrong a love for orature and language: “I have heard the stories from childhood upward” (“Keynote Address” 2006: 26). After her first education in the traditional ways of Okanagan elders, Armstrong attended university in British Columbia, and then returned to Penticton to work as an educator, writer, researcher, and

cultural/political activist. Since 1986 she has served as Executive Director of En'owkin Centre, an educational institution where courses in speaking, reading and writing N'silxchn (the Okanagan language) are taught.

Because Armstrong lives on a reserve and writes primarily about issues relevant to her community, the literature she produces fits Thomas King's "tribal" category. In fact, Armstrong insists that her focus embodies the Okanagan philosophy of En'owkin in that it is intrinsically linked to her community's rituals and obligations (qtd. in Haladay 2006: 32-3). Yet her creative projects also chronicle violence against Aboriginal peoples and suggest methods to overcome oppression. Consequently, King's polemical approach describes her work too, such as the "Red Power" novel *Slash* and the edited collection of Indigenous literary criticism, *Looking at the Words of Our People*. Published by the En'owkin Centre through a process Janice Acoose (Saulteaux) calls "literary midwifery" (2008: 222), these books signify Armstrong's proactive commitment to community. Congruent with the new nationalist agenda that sets out to strengthen Aboriginal sovereignty and self-determination by rooting communities in their cultural, geopolitical and historical specificities, the author's lived relationship with, and within, the Okanagan Nation also represents how she is engaged in the "Truth arising out of the Event," enabling her to speak with "an authentic inner conviction" (Žižek, *Ticklish* 2008: 215). In Armstrong's own words, her writing is "a quest for the empowerment of her people" ("Disempowerment" 1998: 241); her work "come[s] from our common experience of being Native in Canada" ("Four Decades" 2001: xvi); and her motive is to "tell a better story than the one being told about us" ("Aboriginal" 2005: 184).

In Armstrong's "This is a Story," Kyoti is awoken early from his nap because he has to make a follow-up visit to the People on the Okanagan River. Initially, he only wants to be feted by them but notices the population has thinned out, the river has been altered so the salmon cannot flow, and the original dwelling-places of the People replaced by Swallow/White suburban developments. On top of this, Kyoti's "tribe" fails to recognize him, and few can speak his language. Obviously, the older Indigenous order has been disturbed. Elsewhere, in an article entitled "Land Speaking," Armstrong explains that in the case of her people, the Okanagan language (N'silxchn) and the Okanagan home base are intricately connected: "N'silxchn ... was given to us by the land we live in" (175). Because this symbiosis of language and place is a central part of Okanagan philosophy, it follows that when the People are forcibly removed, Indigenous life-worlds are threatened. Žižek would call this catastrophe that resulted from damming the Okanagan River for flood control measures "the unconditional Real of global Capital" ("Introduction," *Ticklish* 2008: xxvii). In this disturbed colonized world, Kyoti approaches

everyone and tries out different words until he finds one old woman who understands the mother tongue. This elder relates the history of land confiscation, dried-up fish runs, and then she chastises Kyoti, saying: he was negligent; he failed to exercise sovereign power; he deserted kith and kin.

(Civ)ilized vs. (Sav)age?

In a seminal discussion of Armstrong's trickster tale, literary critic Renate Eigenbrod argues that Kyoti's attempted reconnection with the People produces an insurgent rewriting of Western notions of racialization. To make this claim, Eigenbrod equates Kyoti with the quintessential "transient Indian," one who merely passes over the land without accruing rights in it. As such, his actions are to be contrasted with White colonizers (Monsters) and even with the People (Aboriginal settlers in the agricultural/commercial stage of existence). The Swallows too are symbolic of the complex historical negotiations between immigrant (Western) and migrant (Aboriginal) communities. According to Eigenbrod, irony is at work when the migratory Swallows (Whites) care about their homes, and by extension, homeland, whereas the sedentary People (Okanagan) do not. Eigenbrod ends up reading "This is a Story" as an allegory, suggesting that the tension between sedentary and migratory cultures is undermined when the roles (the "civ/sav dichotomy," her borrowed phrase that was coined by Métis poet and scholar Emma LaRocque) are reversed (*Travelling* 2005: 31, 86). This paper also sees the homesteading "greedy" Swallows as associated with the White world's capitalist totalitarian culture – Žižek's the big Other -- but not through the trope of settling vs. travelling. Ultimately, it agrees with Eigenbrod that Whites are depicted as savage in their exploitation of Mother Earth, but does not concur with her conclusion that Aboriginal peoples end up subverting a "good/bad binary" (*Travelling* 2005: 31). The idea that Whites can be more connected to home and land than the Indigenous population highlights the difficulties of defining exactly who operates as the hegemony, where the borders are drawn, and how that centralized power can be dismantled (and not simply reified within the same system). As Žižek's writing implies, since the big Other naturalizes the fictions of subversion in order to include the "savage" alongside the "civilized," Armstrong has left us with another inscription, to some degree, of the dominant race-based system of identification. Still working with Žižek, then, is there an element to his theory of transgressive creativity that might reframe this narrative of Monsters, People, and Swallows so that the reading spins along the axis of a different (i.e. non-racialist) epistemology?

The Trickster as *Homo Sacer*

The first step is to make parallels between the Aboriginal trickster and subjects in the Žižekian pantheon who exist outside of the formal rules of capital. Žižek's work with the 'homo sacer'¹² seems appropriate, as that subject is not a subverter of "the system" but a symptom of its ruthlessness. Interestingly, with the homo sacer, the hierarchies of identity and power that are inherent within the structures of colonization and capital — structures based on disavowing those individual/communities/nations that exist out of the boundaries of the race and nation — are still intact. Applied to Armstrong's story, Kyoti's otherness among his own people makes him homo sacer-like as he seems freed from the taint of White civilization but this disavowal of capitalism does not make him "free." While he has slept away a great deal of the colonizing and settling period, and therefore has remained outside the system, he has also lost touch with his People. To reclaim his relations, Kyoti heads up river to visit a "believer," Tommy. The journey allows him to critique material culture, and warn villagers along the way to break the dams and stop eating contaminated (White) food. Here Kyoti serves as a virtuous, scornful critic of the White world but his case against colonization/capitalism is still deeply connected to the hegemonic racist context, especially when he takes a pessimistic view of the upstream Indigenous population, far removed from their roots. Upon close examination, this diasporic group appears as "monstrous" as the (White) Monsters: along with their geographical and linguistic estrangement, they have been corrupted by the cultural products of the capitalist West. In this example, departure from origins — or to use race science's terminology, "degeneration" — comes at a cost: the price for being far from home and land base, and for being co-opted by the big Other, means being taunted and laughed at (133). Just as Thomas King's story struck an odd balance between humour, violence and race (with the abusive White Mistake, the abused Indigenous trickster, and the unhappy cross-species duck/feathered-Indians) there is irony in Jeannette Armstrong's tale, superseded by humiliation, with the homo sacer/Kyoti judging his People as monstrous/degenerate, and the settling and migrating roles — the "civ/sav" dichotomy — being reversed. This is a contradictory relationship between corrupting Whites and Outland People who have left their tribal-centred framework to embrace the big Other; through this example, the Aboriginal worldview is not privileged, new nationalism is not embraced, indigenusness is not instilled into the West, and the logic of capitalism is reinforced.

But "This is a Story" does not end here. A passionate return to roots occurs when Kyoti finally meets up with a young Okanagan man who has been watching the river, searching forward and backward, looking for that old, perfect world of salmon and song. During an

emotional moment of recognition and true belonging -- after Kyoti has found himself adrift, away from community and land base, and in the grip of what Žižek would call “a kind of absolute longing for ‘home’” (*Ticklish* 2008: 208-9) -- an Event occurs that leads to the opening of the possibility of Cosmic retribution. In a god-like way, Kyoti promises to make the young man’s dream come true by breaking the dam, releasing salmon. Then, after shaking a rainbow-ribboned staff, the ground indeed moves. As in King’s story, the re-creator exercises power and attempts to fix the world. However, is it a sign of redemption, or more violence and destruction? What Truth has Armstrong left us with? She concludes by describing an ambiguous spectral oil streak flowing down the Okanagan. How are we to read this image? It has echoes of the Biblical story of the Flood and the Rainbow — another climatic release that resolves plot and action. This crisis would offer a solution of sorts, but the cross-cultural inter-textuality in Armstrong’s narrative does not privilege the Biblical text, nor does it suggest Aboriginal/ecological “balance.” As such, the possibility cannot be ruled out that the dam breaks, the land floods, and all the People drown (along with the Whites). Alternatively, maybe the humans are spared and the salmon are set free. But the big Other’s contaminants, like an oil spill — another sign of Swallows “shitt[ing] all over” (133) — find release too, and the partially evaporated residue becomes a rainbowed slick that heads downstream. Elsewhere, Armstrong has linked pollution to colonialism and capitalism, charging Euro-Canadian settlers with desecrating the earth in a savage way (“Disempowerment” 1998: 239-40). Is she leaving us with another (unsettling) polemical plot-line about White domination, and another (grim) ending marked by an environmental atrocity that foreshadows more destruction and death?

Homo suckers

In King’s tale, we have seen traces of the Enlightenment story in the four ethnic varieties of ducks; in Armstrong’s, “degeneration” has been noted (not to patronize or simplify the “Indian” subject but to revisit the ethos of imperialism and scientific racism). In the Aboriginal narratives, the violators are the colonists (the Mistake, the Monster/Swallow Peoples). Where Whites have justified their expansion by the right of greed (Mistake), of first taker (Swallows) or, more remotely, by the principle of discovery (Monsters), the “Indians,” left in a state of exile (going West; living far upriver), are so contaminated by the commercial ambitions of the big Other they are practically a different species. Here one witnesses how a new nationalist agenda about sovereignty and identity-making loses radical political currency when it engages in the language of capital and presents the Aboriginal diaspora/the-almost-completely-assimilated as

degenerated (or as “outlandish”). Yet another inscription of the dominant race-based system, this kind of reading does not destroy the socio-symbolic network; on the contrary, the original body of data (about imperialism, racism, genocide, environmental atrocity), reordered through humour, anger or insurgency, is otherwise left intact. That is because the impulse to disrupt the hegemony and produce works that do violence to a system that remains unchanged is a “secret longing” of the ideology itself. And those who call for subversions of the dominant order are participating as “*Homo suckers* ... [in] a false poetics of the dispersed that is always in resistance to the mysterious central (capitalized) Power” (Žižek *Welcome* 2002: 66). The post-colonialist demands placed on Aboriginal writers to dismantle the system (Lamont-Stewart 1997: 128) or create resistance knowledge (Battiste 2004: 213-14; Kovach 2009: 18) express the interests of the big Other because they are producing distortions of the existing antagonisms that continue to legitimize exploitation and domination. So instead of asking for more subversion and resistance, if we adjust the lens, clarify the focus, look at the politics of race and identity from an anti-capitalist, anti-colonialist framework, is there a Žižekian “magic moment” that effectively puts the modality in flux, into motion?

The Somewhere/Sometime Rainbow

Once upon a time, Coyote is continually subjected to cataclysms. Even before arriving West, the system threatens to flatten him/her. And in a land far out West, another Kyoti lives like a quintessential “transient” Indian: both outside the system, yet part of it too; neither settling down, nor finally passing through. Whereas King’s tale closes off before a New Subjectivity arrives West, or before the cosmic Event falls out of the Heavens, Armstrong sends her Kyoti on a trip upriver to re-energize the People and break down the barriers. This journey takes the trickster to the zero-point where he is unrecognized, unacknowledged, deprived of all features that support identity. In *The Ticklish Subject*, this is the reduction of the individual to the Void of subjectivization (Žižek 2008: 161). As Armstrong’s Kyoti is a believer, his quest for companionship, community, and salmon clearly epitomizes a Žižekian search for “Another World beneath the order of the lie” (329). This mode of being suggests a new circuitry outside the modality of the big Other. It is revealed through the narrator who ends the story with Kyoti’s two Miracles: the first involving the rainbow staff; and the second, the rainbow slick. This narrator claims to feel Kyoti’s power long after his staff tapped the earth, and long after the ground stopped quaking. Here the Indigenous dimension remains discernible as ripples of energy and connection, as healing, as return. This narrator has also confessed she is watching

the sky, waiting for a Cosmic Event in the form of a passing Red Star. To re-frame these main trickster tropes through a Žižekian lens, a grim historical Event (the McIntyre Dam that destroyed Aboriginal fisheries leading to serious malnutrition and cultural amnesia) is “transubstantiated” into a moment of Truth when the misunderstood and misunderstanding Kyoti – reduced to a homo sacer-like zero-point of identity through subjectivization – shakes his rainbow staff and breaks the earth, opening the world to the possibility of Cosmic Heaven-sent “Red Star” retribution. There is proof of this in the vibrant multi-hued slick flowing downriver — a sign of Žižek’s “Community-to-Come,” with each colour separate, with the “Whole of Being” present in the spectral arc. Those rainbow tides abolish antagonisms, along with racial scales of worth, leaving in their wake “a universal solidarity” (*Ticklish* 2008: 165, 170, 209). In essence, the warning at the end of King’s tale, to watch the sky for falling Cosmic debris, and the earth-rupture in Armstrong’s, which releases ripples of energy and connection followed by a rainbow streak, need not be thought of, then, as re-ordering a hierarchy of origins along another racialist axis. Instead, if one trickster narrative does indeed stand in relation to the next, these creation stories about Cosmic fall-out and arcs of spectral light collectively foretell a future “Red Star” Event -- a Heaven-sent “feathered Indian.” Falling to Earth, or emerging from a ruptured land, s/he will bring with him/her the potential to liberate all beings (red, white, blue or green), connect every community under the spectral arc, and transubstantiate the big Other.

Notes

¹ See *Troubling Tricksters* edited by Reder and Morra, especially Reder "Preface" 2010: vii; Fee "Trickster Moment" 2010: 60; and Leggatt 2010: 221.

² With the exception of critics Ruffo ("From Myth" 2001) and Eigenbrod (*Travelling* 2005), these particular stories that originally appeared in *All My Relations* (1990), an anthology of contemporary Native fiction edited by Thomas King, have not received much attention.

³ Stories transcribed from tape recordings fall under "textualized orature" and use different strategies of communication than narratives that circulate orally ("orature"), or tales that are composed primarily as texts ("textualized orality"). King and Armstrong work with this third type of trickster storytelling. See Gingell 2006: 286. For a discussion about oral vs. written narratives, in particular the aesthetics, speech habits and mnemonic devices of repetition and rhyme, see Eigenbrod "Oral" 1995 and Dickinson 1994.

⁴ "The big Other" is the socio-symbolic network, a "circuitry" that mediates all communication and predetermines the space within which the subject exists (Žižek *Ticklish* 2008: 309-14).

⁵ Quoted in Kamboureli 1996: 233.

⁶ On gender-bending Coyotes as subversive, see Lamont-Stewart 1997; on the "two-spirited" Coyote, see Davidson 1994: 179.

⁷ Linnaeus's description of the four varieties of *Homo sapiens* are "Americanus," "Europaeus," "Asiaticus" and "Afer."

⁸ The ritual is an intertextual link to the "close your eyes" dance practiced by Coyote and other tricksters. See Eigenbrod *Travelling* 2005: 166, 168 and 242 n.20.

⁹ The duck-Indians and the ending that warns of falling cosmic debris anticipates King's title story "A Short History of Indians in Canada" which features Navajos falling from the heavens onto Toronto's Bay Street. By transforming Aboriginal people into birds that crash into skyscrapers on Toronto's "flyway," King also plays with the stereotype of the "feathered Indian" (Eigenbrod, *Travelling* 2005: 133).

¹⁰ On the Coyote genre as humorously subversive, also see Vizenor 1989; Hirsch 2005; and Fee and Flick 1999.

¹¹ Also see Burkhart for a discussion about the role of trickster as a reminder to the People to regulate their values (2004: 17).

¹² See Žižek, "Ch. 4: From *Homo sucker* to *Homo sacer*" and "Ch. 5: From *Homo sacer* to the Neighbour" *Welcome* 2002.

References

Acoose, Janice. 2008. Honoring Ni'Wahkomakanak. In *Reasoning Together: The Native Critics Collective*, edited by Craig S. Womack, *et al.*, 216-33. Norman: University of Oklahoma.

Armstrong, Jeannette. 1985. *Slash*. Penticton, BC: Theytus Books.

---. 1990. This is a Story. In *All My Relations: An Anthology of Contemporary Native Fiction*, edited by Thomas King. 129-35, Toronto: McClelland & Stewart.

---, ed. 1993. *Looking at the Words of Our People: First Nations Analysis of Literature*. Penticton, BC: Theytus Books.

---. 1998. The Disempowerment of First North American Native Peoples and Empowerment Through Their Writing. In *Anthology of Canadian Native Literature in English*, edited by Daniel David Moses and Terry Goldie, 239-42. Toronto: Oxford.

-
- . 1998. Land Speaking. In *Speaking for the Generations: Native Writers on Writing*, edited by Simon J. Ortiz. 174-94. Tucson: University of Arizona.
- . 2001. Four Decades: An Anthology of Canadian Native Poetry from 1960-2000. In *Native Poetry in Canada: A Contemporary Anthology*, edited by Jeannette C. Armstrong and Lally Grauer, vi-xvi. Peterborough, ON: Broadview.
- . 2005. Aboriginal Literatures: A Distinctive Genre within Canadian Literature. In *Hidden in Plain Sight: Contributions of Aboriginal Peoples to Canadian Identity and Culture*, edited by David R. Newhouse, et al, 180-6. Vol. 1. Toronto: University of Toronto.
- . 2006. Keynote Address: The Aesthetic Qualities of Aboriginal Writing. *Studies in Canadian Literature* 31(1): 20-30.
- Atluri, Tara. 2010 Dec 13. "Mild Curry, Mildly Queer: India, Sex, and Slavoj Žižek," *International Journal of Žižek Studies* (Online), 4.4: 1-19. Available at: <http://Žižekstudies.org/index.php/ij25/article/view/298>. Accessed Dec 1 2012.
- Battiste, Marie. 2004. Unfolding the Lessons of Colonization. In *Unhomely States: Theorizing English-Canadian Postcolonialism*, edited by Cynthia Sugars, 209-17. Peterborough, ON: Broadview.
- Bennett, Donna and Russell Brown, eds. 2002. Thomas King. In *A New Anthology of Canadian Literature in English*, 913-14. Don Mills, ON: Oxford.
- Burkhart, Brian Yazzie. 2004. What Coyote and Tales Can Teach Us: An Outline of American Indian Epistemology. In *American Indian Thought*, edited by Anne Waters, 15-26. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- Davidson, Arnold E. 1994. *Coyote Country: Fictions of the Canadian West*. Durham, NC: Duke.
- Dickinson, Peter. 1994. Orality in Literacy: Listening to Indigenous Writing. *Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 14(2): 319-40.
- Eigenbrod, Renate. 1995. The Oral in the Written: A Literature Between Two Cultures. *Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 15(1): 89-102.
- , and Jo-Ann Episkenew, eds. 2002. *Creating Community: A Roundtable on Canadian Aboriginal Literature*. Penticton, BC: Theytus.
- . 2005. *Travelling Knowledges: Positioning the Im/Migrant Reader of Aboriginal Literatures in Canada*. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba.
- Fagan, Kristina. 2005. Teasing, Tolerating, Teaching. In *Me Funny*, edited by Drew Hayden Taylor, 23-50. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre.
- Fee, Margery. 2010. The Trickster Moment, Cultural Appropriation, and the Liberal Imagination in Canada. In *Troubling Tricksters: Revisioning Critical Conversations*, edited by Deanna Reder and Linda Morra, 59-76. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier.
- , and Jane Flick. 1999. Coyote Pedagogy: Knowing Where the Borders Are in Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water*. *Canadian Literature* 161/162: 131-9.

-
- Gingell, Susan. 2006. Teaching the Talk that Walks on Paper: Oral Traditions and Textualized Orature in the Canadian Literature Classroom. In *Home-Work: Postcolonialism, Pedagogy, and Canadian Literature*, edited by Cynthia Sugars, 285-300. Ottawa: University of Ottawa.
- Haladay, Jane. 2006. The Grandmother Language: Writing Community Process in Jeannette Armstrong's *whispering in shadows*. *Studies in Canadian Literature* 31(1): 32-48.
- Hirsch, Mirjam. 2005. Subversive Humour: Canadian Native Playwrights' Winning Weapon of Resistance. In *Me Funny*, edited by Drew Hayden Taylor, 99-122. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre.
- Hulan, Renee and Linda Warley. 2002. Comic Relief: Pedagogical Issues Around Thomas King's *Medicine River*. In *Creating Community*, edited by Renate Eigenbrod and Jo-Ann Episkenew, 125-46. Penticton, BC: Theytus.
- Justice, Daniel Heath. 2006. *Our Fire Survives the Storm: A Cherokee Literary History*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota.
- Kamboureli, Smaro. 1996. Thomas King. In *Making a Difference: Canadian Multicultural Literature*, edited by Smaro Kamboureli, 233. Toronto: Oxford.
- King, Thomas. 1990. The One About Coyote Going West. In *All My Relations: An Anthology of Contemporary Native Fiction*, edited by Thomas King, 95-106. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart.
- . 1997. Godzilla vs Post-Colonial. In *New Contexts of Canadian Criticism*, edited by Ajay Hebel, Donna Palmateer Penee and J. R. (Tim) Struthers, 241-8. Peterborough: Broadview.
- . 2003. *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative*. Toronto: House of Anansi.
- . 2005. *A Short History of Indians in Canada: Stories*. Toronto: HarperCollins.
- Kovach, Margaret. 2009. *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Contexts*. Toronto: University of Toronto.
- Lamont-Stewart, Linda. 1997. Androgyny as Resistance to Authoritarianism in Two Postmodern Canadian Novels. *Mosaic* 30(3): 115-30.
- LaRocque, Emma. 1975. *Defeathering the Indian*. Agincourt: The Book Society of Canada.
- Leggatt, Judith. 2010. Quincentennial Trickster Poetics. In *Troubling Tricksters: Revisioning Critical Conversations*, edited by Deanna Reder and Linda Morra, 221-38. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier.
- Maracle, Lee. 1990. *Sojourner's Truth and Other Stories*. Vancouver: Press Gang.
- Ortiz, Simon J. 2006. Foreword. In *American Indian Literary Nationalism*, edited by Jace Weaver et al., vii-xiv. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico.

-
- Reder, Deanna. 2010. A Preface: Ruminations About Troubling Tricksters. In *Troubling Tricksters: Revisioning Critical Conversations*, edited by Deanna Reder and Linda Morra, i-xi. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier.
- Ridington, Robin. 2000. Happy Trails to You: Contested Discourse and Indian Removals in Thomas King's *Truth and Bright Water*. *Canadian Literature* 167: 89-107.
- Ruffo, Armand Garnet. 1995. From Myth to Metafiction: A Narratological Analysis of Thomas King's 'The One About Coyote Going West.' *International Journal of Canadian Studies* 12: 135-54.
- , ed. 2001. *(Ad)dressing Our Words: Aboriginal Perspectives on Aboriginal Literatures*. Penticton: Theytus.
- Taylor, Drew Hayden. 2005. Laughing Till Your Face is Red. In *Hidden in Plain Sight: Contributions of Aboriginal Peoples to Canadian Identity and Culture*, edited by David R. Newhouse, et al, 203-9. Vol. 1. Toronto: University of Toronto.
- , ed. 2005. *Me Funny*. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre.
- Vizenor, Gerald. 1989. Trickster Discourse: Comic Holotropes and Language Games. In *Narrative Chance: Postmodern Discourse on Native American Literatures*, edited by Gerald Vizenor, 187-212. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico.
- Weaver, Jace, Craig S. Womack and Robert Warrior. 2006. *American Indian Literary Nationalism*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico.
- Žižek, Slavoj. 2002. *Welcome to the Desert of the Real: Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates*. London and New York: Verso.
- . 2008. *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*. 2nd ed. London: Verso.