

READ IT AND ~~WEEP~~ LAUGH:

Humour and Mistake-Making in *Green Grass, Running Water*

SAMANTHA ELMSLEY

In this essay, Samantha Elmsley perceptively illustrates how laughter generates accountability for non-native readers approaching Thomas King's novel, *Green Grass, Running Water* through a settler-colonial critical framework. She suggests that when characters make humorous mistakes in the text, it reveals the underlying tensions between native and European discourses. Laughing at these mistakes can help non-native readers address their own complicity in settler-colonial/native power relations by acknowledging existing power structures, and, through laughter, undermining them. Bringing together a Bakhtinian approach to laughter with a Foucauldian analysis of power relationships, Elmsley shows how humour "frees readers from habitual interpretations" in order to "question their own subjective standpoint," and make space for alternative native subjectivities and epistemologies. This essay won the 2013 Avie Bennett Prize for best undergraduate essay in Canadian literature.

Emily Ballantyne

I wish I was a hilarious writer, but I am not. Fortunately for you, reader, Thomas King is, and he is using it to leverage a space for reimagining. Humour surrounding mistake-

making in *Green Grass, Running Water* reclaims agency for the individual moving against overarching structures of power. In this paper, I will trace the linkages between power and mistake-making in the novel, establish the demand on the individual to take responsibility for these mistakes, and examine the ways in which the reader is implicated in this demand.

Power and mistake-making are explicitly linked from the outset of the novel. Sergeant Cereno, sent to the hospital to investigate the escape of the four Indians, becomes increasingly terse as Dr. Hovaugh mistakes his title repeatedly: "These are very old men, patrolman." "'Women,' Sergeant Cereno said. 'And it's sergeant'" (King 75). And later King writes: "'Perhaps you would like some tea, detective Cereno.' 'Sergeant'" (95). Like two actors in a sketch comedy, Dr. Hovaugh and Sergeant Cereno cannot seem to get it right, one constantly forgetting the trappings of power and the other insistent upon them. In this way, Dr. Hovaugh's mistake calls attention to the Sergeant's obsession with the rules of engagement, laying the ground for mistake-making as a leveraging force. In his examination of folk comedy at

medieval banquets, Mikhail Bakhtin stresses the power of the comedic as a destabilizing force. He positions narratives of authority as encompassing “an intolerant, one-sided tone of seriousness [. . .] an icy, petrified tone” (200), while laughing narratives “degrade power” and “[clarify] man’s consciousness, [giving] him a new outlook on life” (210, 209). For Bakhtin, laughter is a means of loosening the ossification embedded in authoritative narrative, creating possibilities for rebirth. In the same way, Sergeant Cereno’s insistence on title highlights his rigidity in the face of authority, while destabilizing the staging of power through laughter.

A particular vision of power is presented in this novel, one that is concerned not only with the power staged by individuals, but also with overarching systems of power and their effect on subjective agency. In his essay “Method,” Michel Foucault writes:

Power relations are both intentional and nonsubjective [. . .] there is no power that is not exercised without a series of aims and objectives. But that does not mean that it results from the choice or decision of an individual subject[. . .] the rationality of power is characterized by tactics that are often quite

explicit at the restricted level [. . .] which end by forming comprehensive systems. (136)

For Foucault, subjects participate in the tactics of struggle while the broader structures of power relations are beyond the scope of any one individual. An in-text example of this arises in the border-crossing story, in which Alberta's family has their outfits taken away from them by a maliciously overzealous guard (King 257). This tactic of disempowerment performed by the border guard has an immediate goal: to bully Alberta's family by confiscating their dance outfits. It is also participating more broadly in a "comprehensive system" or structure of racism against First Nations peoples.

While clearly aware of and working within these power dynamics, mistake-making in this text seems to place a demand on individual subjects to take responsibility,¹

¹ Margery Fee and Jane Flick analyse the "in-jokes" as a similar call to accountability in their article "Coyote Pedagogy: Knowing Where the Borders Are in Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water*": "King's strategy for writing for an audience primarily composed of the uninformed is not to pander to its preconceptions or to produce explanations, but to entice, even trick this audience into finding out for themselves. The reward for following King's merry chase is the pure pleasure of

despite the existence of these broader social structures. Humour in this novel carries through when the mistake maker takes responsibility, despite his/her apparent powerlessness as a subject in the context of overarching power structures. Lionel's three mistakes are a prime example of this call to accountability. The narrator tells us that "Lionel had only made three mistakes in his entire life, the kinds of mistakes that seem small enough at the time, but somehow get out of hand" (King 30). His first mistake, wanting to have his tonsils out, results in him being labeled for the rest of his life as at risk for heart problems (37). Lionel's second mistake, agreeing to present a paper for his professor at a conference, results in jail time and a criminal record that makes it difficult for him to get a job (55). Compounded with his status as a First Nations person, this makes for some hard times indeed. Finally, "the third mistake that Lionel made was taking the job at Bill

getting the point or the joke, the pleasure of moving across the border separating insider and outsider. Borders make us stupid and allow us to remain so if we let them" (132). In the same way that I link mistake-making to accountability, Fee and Flick see the in-jokes as an invitation to educate oneself against Native stereotypes.

Bursum's Home Entertainment Barn" (80), where he wallows for a number of years. While Lionel's own mistakes seem to have set the events in motion, which result in ultimately damaging consequences, the consequences themselves cannot be attributed solely to Lionel. Though it was technically Lionel's mistake that set the chain of events in motion, being mislabeled as someone with heart problems was the fault of the hospital staff, who mistook him for their actual patient. The second mistake was hardly foreseeable; it was rather a case of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. The third is related to the first two; working at Bursum's is presented as one choice on a short list: "'You look like a smart fellow,' one of the officers told him. 'Get your life together. With your record, you're running out of options'" (64). Through the lens of mistake-making, Lionel's agency as a subject is in this way portrayed as limited against broader societal structures.

Despite the explicit injustice of Lionel's position, King retains the connection between humour and mistakes throughout. The statement, "Lionel had only made three mistakes in his entire life" (30), is ludicrous, intended to make the reader laugh. Lionel

himself also tried to point to the humour embedded in the second mistake to his boss: "It was all a big mistake [. . .] if you had been there, you would have laughed" (63-64). Retrospectively, Lionel's aunt Norma tells the four Indians about Lionel's blunders in a humorous light: "You should see some of the mistakes he's made. Would make your teeth fall out" (167). Rather than giving way under these injustices, then, this text makes light of them. Simultaneously, Lionel is still held to account; Hawkeye advises him to "try not to mess up your life again [. . .] We're not as young as we used to be" (387).² Humour, then, reclaims agency for the individual within overarching structures of power. In her book *Humor in Contemporary Native North American Literature: Reimagining Narrative*, Eva Gruber posits that laughter

creates a liminal space where familiar or interpretive patterns are rendered invalid and readers are free to reevaluate their own perspectives and epistemologies. This carnivalesque leveling of established hierarchies

² While this line signals the attempt of the four Indians to fix Lionel's mistake for him, Lionel is still depicted as responsible for the mess, and is therefore still held to account.

[. . .] affords the opportunity to engage in dialog. (2)

Gruber sees humour as a leveraging force, using it as a “Trojan horse to express issues that, outside of a humorous frame, would be deemed offensive by a Euro-American leadership” (37). If humour frees readers from habitual (structural) interpretations, it follows that readers are now free to question their own subjective standpoint through humour. Thus, treating mistakes in a humourous way allows the subject - in this case, Lionel - to take responsibility, despite the overarching power structures apparently at odds with individual agency.

In addition to the ludicrous mistakes of the characters, King takes the sorry facts of history and makes them laughable as well. At the hotel after having been released from jail, Lionel is musing upon a painting of George Armstrong Custer, who led the charge at the Battle of the Little Bighorn:

Lionel considered the painting for a time, remembering the convoy of police cars that had descended on the van. He was still shaken and embarrassed by the whole episode. Maybe that’s

how Custer had felt when he discovered his mistake. Embarrassed. (King 61)

By linking Custer's mistake to Lionel's, King implicates settler-colonial discourse – and by extension, any Euro-Canadian reader – in the need to take responsibility, using humour as a “Trojan horse” to do so. Similarly, but perhaps less historically, Old Woman points out Nasty Bumpo's mistake in a humorous way when he gets her name wrong: “I can tell an Indian when I see one. Chingachgook is an Indian. You're an Indian. Case closed.’ ‘I'm sure this is embarrassing for you’, says Old Woman” (392). Embarrassment implies recognition of one's mistake, and by extension, accountability for it. Old Woman explicitly highlights the failure of settler-colonial discourse to take responsibility for its mistakes, while still using humour to cushion the blow.

By contrast, the mistakes that do not get laughed at in this text point to the real-life implications for European-First Nations' relations this approach could inspire. After their dance outfits have been reclaimed, a representative of the politician claiming responsibility for the same calls Alberta's family and mistakes them for Cree: “The

Honorable Robert Loblaw,' said the voice, 'is always happy to be of assistance to his Cree constituency.' 'Should probably tell that guy that me and my husband are Blackfoot'" (281). Curiously, the representative is always referred to as "the voice"; it has no location as a subject. In addition to being a representative of this particular politician, then, the voice can be said to represent racist power structures as well. Another example of this arises when Alberta's car is stolen, and the police officer mistakes her for a white woman: "'I mean, I can't believe anyone would steal my car.' The officer smiled. 'Believe it, honey,' she said. 'The bastards will steal anything'" (304). This woman exists as a subject because she is an actual, localizable character; she also stands in for a system of authority: the police force. In this way, like the voice, her comments can be seen as stemming from both a subjective position and broader structures of power. These moments are not treated with the same kind of humour as the mistakes outlined previously in this paper, but both are pointing to broader problems embedded in European-First Nation relations. This effectively reminds the reader that while humour may be leveraging a space for taking responsibility, the

power structures the novel is working against are real, problematic, and often not funny at all. By choosing not to treat all mistakes humorously, then, King reminds the reader that North American citizens have a duty to think through these issues in the real world.

In a similar way, Coyote calls readers to account through humourous mistake-making by defying spatiotemporal rules. The figure of Coyote implicates reader responsibility when that one³ apologizes for telling the story. Uninhibited by spatiotemporal boundaries, Coyote speaks more easily to a universal audience because that one is not limited to a particular time or place. Rather, Coyote is constantly slipping between stories: "'Coyote, Coyote,' I says. 'Get back here' [. . .] 'It's okay, Coyote,' says the Lone Ranger. 'We won't start without you.' 'Great,' says Coyote. And that one dances back into this story" (293). Gruber suggests that Coyote is a figure of "Trickster discourse", a figure who "exceeds the level of a single character within a text" (103). She writes

³ This is the term used in place of a pronoun in reference to Coyote in *Green Grass, Running Water*. Since the text itself treats Coyote's gender as irrelevant, I will continue along the same lines in this paper. Also, it makes me laugh.

that “trickster discourse is instrumental in Native authors’ attempts to affect change in their readers by humorously reimagining Nativeness” (Gruber 104).

Gruber here stumbles into a sticky point in literary interpretation of Native texts. According to Kristina Fagan in her essay “What’s the Trouble with Trickster,” there is no universal Trickster in First Nations culture; in fact, the term is an anthropological invention (12). Rather, Fagan argues, it is important to situate particular trickster-esque figures in their historical context:

we can see a move away from an ‘embodied’ figure with roots in Indigenous lives toward a trickster that is primarily a metaphor for a particular theoretical stance. (6)

In this way, “the trickster, presented as a site of instability, becomes a way of stabilizing Native texts” (Fagan 8). This is dangerous because it appears to be a means for settler-colonial discourse to take precedence in the interpretation of Native texts; it also contributes to the false idea of the stativity of

Native culture.⁴ For these reasons, I disagree with the approach Gruber takes in her analysis of Coyote, when she puts that one in the “trickster discourse” corner.⁵ However, I believe her analysis of Coyote is still applicable

⁴ More positively, Fagan also points out that “the emergence of the trickster in contemporary Native writing took place in a very urban, cross-cultural, organized and strategic manner. This conscious recreation of the tradition does not mean that the contemporary manifestations of the trickster tradition are in any way ‘fake.’ But they are [. . .] recreated because of specific and current needs” (12). While still holding to the need to locate particular Native traditions in space and time, Fagan also celebrates the reclaiming of the Trickster as strategy in contemporary Native art.

⁵ Gruber herself is also aware of her potentially problematic position as a non-Native critic writing about Native literature, a fact she acknowledges at the end of her introduction: “In my position as a White European critic studying Native literature I am acutely aware of the restrictions I may be subject to” (3). In relegating Coyote to trickster discourse, Gruber (unknowingly?) participates in what Margery Fee, in her essay “The Trickster and Cultural Appropriation”, labels “the liberal imagination”: a mindset that, among other characteristics, needs a subject to defend and protect (Fee 65). By constructing a Trickster discourse, non-Native critics stabilize literature in a way that allows them to implicate their own power perspective in Native texts. King himself brings out a similar point in his essay “Godzilla vs. Post-colonial,” when he argues that the term “assumes that the starting point for that discussion [about contemporary Native literature] is the advent of Europeans in North America” (185).

outside of this discourse. As a character, Coyote does have the power to defy spatiotemporal boundaries in a way the realist characters cannot. Due to this, one can interpret Coyote as “humorously [reimagining] Nativeness”. Thus, we can still read Coyote as achieving these ends without necessarily thinking of that one as participating in trickster discourse.

So, because Coyote the character is not limited to time or space, that one’s mistakes and the need to take responsibility for them speak to a universal audience. The four Indians often call Coyote to account: “‘Come on, Coyote,’ said the Lone Ranger. ‘You can help too.’ ‘I had nothing to do with it,’ said Coyote. ‘I believe I was in Houston’” (King 320). Functioning to some extent as a universal character, the fact that Coyote is often held to account points to the importance placed on responsibility in the text. This is also evident in Coyote’s apology, acknowledged at the beginning and carried out at the end of the novel. When the four Indians are preparing to tell the story, an apology is on their checklist of necessary items: “‘And the apology?’ said Hawkeye. ‘Coyote can do that,’ said the Lone Ranger. ‘Okay, are we ready now?’” (9). In the

final pages of the novel, Coyote is asked to carry it out: "Before we begin, did anyone offer an apology?" (430). Coyote's first attempt to apologize is, however, rebuffed for insincerity, and that one is reminded "how far you had to run" and "how long you had to hide" because of the last insufficient apology (430). This prompts a string of very earnest apologies - "I am really *very, very* sorry," "*Sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry*" - ending in laughter: "'Hee-hee,' says Coyote. 'Hee- hee'" (430). This scene uses laughter to ease the immediate gravity of the situation, without diminishing the call to accountability in relation to Coyote's mistake. By defying spatiotemporal borders, Coyote is also relatable as a character regardless of the reader's subjective place in space and time. Lionel's mistakes, while relatable from an empathetic perspective, arise from a particular spatiotemporal position, and can thus be interpreted as particular to his situation; the reader can choose not to apply Lionel's standards of accountability to themselves. Coyotes know no such bounds, and the reader is therefore instructed, laughingly, to take responsibility for themselves as well.

Humorous mistake-making in *Green Grass, Running Water* asserts subjective power

within and against overarching power structures. In this way, King asserts a new way of doing discourse; rather than the dominated speaking to their dominators, a multi-voiced, chaotic conversation is established. As a fifth-generation settler colonial, my voice has been very loud for a very long time. It is time to shut up and listen. More than that, it is time to laugh.

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