Comeback of the boomerang – Thomas King’s
Short stories in the context of anthropological gaze and linguistic aporia

Sarbani Banerjee
University of Western Ontario, Canada

Abstract

My paper examines how Thomas King has tampered with the Received Standard English in his writings, while making the language bear the burden of his unique communal experiences and perspectives. I explore the function of his hybridized broken English that opens up a dialogue between the ‘Self’ and the ‘Other’ in a postcolonial context. King evinces that the Eurocentric value-additions have resulted in rampant vulgarization of a vast repertoire of indigenous customs, beliefs and idioms. In that light, I study the involvement of anthropology as a discipline with questionable intentions that has romanticized and fossilized the live reality of the indigenous ‘Other’.

I trace King’s position amid two opposing tendencies – of retrieval of a ‘pure’ pre-colonial past with the aid of native languages by dissociating them from English, and of reaching out to the global audience with the medium of ‘english’. Subsequently, I discuss the various features of King’s writings, such as maintaining gaps of silence, employing untranslated indigenous words and dealing with interchangeable dualities, which draws on Jacques Derrida’s concept of ‘aporia’. The tussle between content and form creates an open-endedness, impeding every kind of presuppositions that facilitate a ‘smooth’ Western readership.

Can the indigenous groups practice the same exclusivity within the scope of a radicalized ‘english’ that they previously used to enjoy in their respective aboriginal dialects? I argue that broken English/‘english’ can play the role of mouthpiece for these communities, and become an even more efficient medium for carrying the testimony of violence than the almost-defunct indigenous tongues.

Keywords: Broken English, Thomas King, postcolonial, anthropology, indigenous, aporia
Since the indigenous communities love to tell stories and the White man loves to listen to stories, their bond should have been solid. But Thomas King tells us what happened when between a narrator’s cumulative memory and the listener’s fluid faculty of hearing and imagination, a camera, a recorder and a microphone sat fat, determined to give a freezing closure to all curiosities and doubts about the “Red Indian” lifestyle, swallowing ‘the supernatural’ and ‘the superstitious’ with pure technology and reproducing them in turn with a perfect touch of romance and art that surpasses any fairy-tale. Thanks to these masterminds, the larger part of the world cannot conceive of “Red Indians” in modern professions even today – as writers, teachers or filmmakers – without images of blotched faces and feathered head-gears encroaching their popular consciousness. The White Man’s make-believe prototype continues to survive triumphantly by using the indigenous communities as pawns for ‘authentic aboriginal stories’, objectivising the lives of these people into puny stereotypes, regardless of their consent or consultation.

Thomas King’s One Good Story, That One limns the intriguing contact between the Whites and the First Nations people, evincing how the pseudo-authentic White narratives have changed the nomenclature of topographies like water bodies and mountains. King reflects that the familial propinquity for the indigenous people extends to their surrounding macrocosm both animate and inanimate, and this relationship with nature thus defines their own existential and spiritual relevance. That is why, the colonial intention of hijacking names is synonymous to rendering a group of people with facelessness. Kristina Aurylaitė argues in her essay that “acts of (mis)naming are manifestations of power as they include or exclude, allow or deny access” (8), thereby divesting an individual body of its reality (which is one’s assertive performative presence) and insistently reducing it to representation. In that light, King writes in a broken English, thereby using the colonizer’s vehicle of communication to tamper with its very own conventional yardsticks, bringing into forefront an open-ended framework of the non-European ethos that can perform as separate entities before the world.

In One Good Story, That One, the discipline of anthropology itself is put to question that collects torn and deliberately reduced clippings of the native lifestyle, thereby highlighting politics of representation. Anthropology legitimizes surrogating the local folk elements of these communities with clones of colonizer’s version, thus wiping out many facts that are ontologically interspersed with these people and that pass down from one generation to another as heirlooms of collective remembrance, in the form of typified symbols and leitmotifs. The aggression involved in this monologist treatment of a subject matter is explained by Mikhail Bakhtin: “Monologue manages without the other, and therefore to some degree materializes all reality...Life by its very nature is dialogic. To live means to participate in dialogue” (Ridington 148). To freeze a possible second version is therefore tantamount to rendering the “Other” as dead. At the same time, as Jeff Miller recognizes, such anthropological platitude tends to obfuscate the exclusivity of the different North American indigenous tribes, superimposing the broad empty term “Indian” for a large number of languages, rituals and practices, thereby not extending the basic will to comprehend them for what they are. According to King, this ignorant blanket appellation of “Indian” for all the
native communities is akin to the desire to crush any kind of incongruity among them and even them out in the mould of a wishful homogeneity. Such purposeful lack of knowledge on the part of the White world, just like facility of knowledge in other cases, becomes an appendage of power and control.

With the reversal of the original myth of Genesis, One Good Story, That One deflates this entire predatory paradigm. Playing with the singularity and plurality of God and distorting the names of Adam and Eve into Ah-damn and Evening, the desire for an ‘original’ Native story is frustrated with a traditional Judeo-Christian tale. In fact, the figures of Adam, Eve and even God become signs of something else here, as the critics Davidson, Walton and Andrews would point out: “Unlike Eve, Evening is not breaking a treaty (so to speak) with god, who has not told her that the tree is sacrosanct. She is hungry and she eats.” Adam, instead of being a noble father-figure with Eve as his appendage, is held up to ridicule: “That Ah-damn not so smart. Like Harley James, white man, those. Evening, she be Indian woman, I guess” (8), and as the critics infer, “Ah-Damn’s affinity with White culture, which is written, is contrasted with Evening’s affinity with Native culture, which is primarily oral and closely allied with nature”. Further, “Since King’s text posits Evening’s actions as practical rather than seductive, it undercuts Eve’s traditional role as femme fatale (58).” Evening here is an intelligent woman who can very much be identified in today’s modern world and who has the nerve to tell a rather archaic god, as he grumbles because she has eaten his apple: “Calm down, watch some television” (53).

As critics Tataryn and Gingell reflect, by not ascertaining whether the anthropologists are “good men” or “may be fish” (4), besides the satirical expansion of possibilities viz-a-viz the readers’ multiple subject position, there is also a hilarity produced at the cost of these gullible White men: “They are being fished around in and completely take the joker’s bait…Perceived as “Pretty loud talkers” (4), they do not come to listen or learn but to appropriate a history that serves romantic nationalism. While losing tapes here seems analogous to losing marbles, the reliance of the anthropologists on taping provides greater dimensions to this joke. Therefore, the storyteller oblige with a tale for their recorder mindset” (13). The iconoclastic attempt on King’s part to disrupt the predetermined relationship between the signifier and the signified, to render writing “a neutral, composite, oblique space” (Barthes), and to deconstruct an object’s inscribed relation with respect to its meaning and function – if we may call this as a “Don Quixote syndrome” – explicitly challenges these master narratives of Western literature and the mainstream enterprise of canon-making. Clare Archer-Lean studies how King’s writings re-educate a reader in terms of their pre-set ideas about reading:

“Vital Western emblems are reconstructed, to protest their original ‘naturalization’ as positive. For Noah to be creatively resituated as breast-mad lunatic, or Elisa Frazer to be re-imagined as lascivious lesbian vampire is not simply a humorous absurdity. Exploration of such emblems makes it immediately apparent that there is a complexity to the writing. For example, the primacy of protest as conflict or opposition has to be
revised as a reading assumption when the texts are read through notions of oral story telling praxis” (294).

In the story “The One About Coyote Going West”, King assumes a cultural sensitivity on the part of the readers for imbibing the language, theme and even a trickster entity like Coyote, and the readers are allowed only to watch the performance from the threshold of an uninhibited audience. Coyote creates an in-group jargon where colours correspond to precise symbols – such as red for Indians, blue for sky, green for earth and white for the colonizers, burdening the readers with the guilt of voyeuristic function of intruding where they should not. As King mentions in his essay “Godzilla Versus the Postcolonial”, this is a marked trait of “tribal literature” which, being averse to enact the role of a specimen-of-display before the foreigner’s gaze, celebrates its shared exclusivity through barring the entrée of any outsider within its linguistic and gestural precincts. In fact, rebounding the ‘gaze’ with ‘counter-gaze’, King deconstructs the institution of Bible and posits Coyote in an ambassadorial capacity, who undertakes the function to “fix up the world”. Radically breaking away from the Christian dogma and fashioning an alternative myth with indigenous legacy at the centre, Coyote mocks the colonizers by distorting the names of Christopher Columbus and Jacques Cartier:

“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 (68).”

Scott Momaday’s understanding of “Indianness” as a self-appraising mirror chiefly constituting moral qualities which, “in order to be realized completely, has to be exposed” (162), might apparently call for an open vista that contradicts the premises of “tribal literature”. On a closer inspection, though, Momaday’s sensibility about “Indianness” assumes an idyllic hypothetical audience that is transparent in terms of perception, consumption and dissemination. On the other hand, the First Nation history’s deliberate occlusion from the Canadian mainstream discourse points out to the distortive “eye” to which Indian self-expression was subjected, to the extent that the White world’s resistive intervention had permanently annulled the indigenous habitats and knowledge-systems with upside-down value-judgments. Thus, what King explains as the agenda of “tribal literature” is a cynical act towards fencing and safeguarding a community and its core essence from further dilution. In that respect, the practice of story-telling, as Gerald Vizenar reflects: “imagination is a concrete process of incorporating and perpetuating tradition, and its most important outlet is storytelling: articulating and sharing the values of the community”, becomes, in my reading, the existential necessity for rationalizing what Momaday calls “Indianness”, yet simultaneously also intending to block the past exploitative history from repeating itself. Nevertheless, as Ridington studies, King in his way of crossing “illegal borders” transcends any ghettoed notion of subject, audience or literary device:

“King's story is so multivocal that no single reader will understand all the references, since the communities with which he shares experience include Indians and academics,
Americans and Canadians, mythic characters and friends. King contextualizes his story within a multitude of biographies and experiences (12). King also foregrounds the question of whether it is so easy to “discover” and conclusively represent the ‘Other’, as this purpose involves internalization of problematic ideas that obscures the nuanced facets of the Indians. He identifies that the epistemic violence inflicted by the Western scriptural knowledge had commenced with the colonial intention of fixing polarities between the indigenous and the Western patterns of living, as well as through re-producing the non-Western ‘Other’ in terms of Western standards of ideals, which resulted in rampant vulgarization of the vast repertoire of indigenous practices, beliefs and idioms. King’s counter-discourse therefore necessitates the binary between right and wrong, written and oral, civil and barbaric to fall apart, thus laying bare the falsity that have been circulated and validated by the likes of Columbus and Cartier under the stronghold of bureaucratic record. According to Tataryn and Gingell, in one of the lines “No Indianman No Chinaman No Frenchman Too bad, those” (3), King not only posits the Whiteman as an alien and generalized stock figure as opposed to all sorts of ‘lesser’ groups, but also makes room for an open creative space of interpretation for the recipient of his work: “Are we sorry for the gr...occupy enumerated or for the Whiteman? Does the phrase signify an excess degree of badness? Whose? Whose side are we as reader-listener-speakers on? The story leaves such questions open” (12). The concocted tale of Coyote that claims the Indians to be more primal than the Whites obviously has no truth-claim attached to it – quite the opposite. Through his ludicrous tell-tale stories, King as if tries to show that every history is more-or-less the same, immersed in some sort of a biased myth and projected in a way that privileges one particular people over another. At this point, King’s approach very much draws upon Jacque Derrida’s notion of the limited premises of any given truth: “As soon as truth is a limit or has limits… and assuming that it knows some limits…and assuming that it knows some limits…truth would be a certain relation to what terminates or determines it.”

Playing and constantly negotiating with the face-value of status-quo is part of King’s authorial goals. Tanis MacDonald borrows the term “aporia” from Derrida to explain the sense of confusion, embarrassment and lack of self-reflexivity – a purposeful lacuna in King’s stories, where narrative and conversational impasse can invade the characters and readers at any moment without providing any viable solution. In his works, as the critics observe, the story itself is a trick that deceives the reader’s expectations through inversion and the narrator as the guarantor of this simulated narrative, meaning King himself, is the trickster. One can realize that the very desire to bind a discursive culture within the ethics of scripted, documented work results in a sense of discomfiture and awkwardness which, while writing as a representative of the indigenous communities, King primarily intends not to do away with. Moreover, lacking any didactic value, King’s story-building, as MacDonald observes, is not so much about inclusion and exclusion, as it is about “a willingness to listen to a story that does not participate fully in Western epistemologies”. He posits Aboriginal literature in the capacity of polyvocal discourse (that often evokes the category of “interfusional”, as mentioned in “Godzilla Versus the Postcolonial”), thereby appropriating a generous portion of the North American culture in line with indigenous sensibilities:
— Could be whiteman’s ways of telling stories add to Turtle Island culture.
— You’re right; there is another way to see who’s adding to what” (8).

It is also worth noting that the gender of Coyote is hardly mentioned, as Paul Radin points out that the figure of Coyote is manifest as someone who (Radin) “has as yet developed no sense of true sex differentiation”. This in-between figure has been especially devised to disconcert the starkness of extreme polarities. Linda Lamont-Steward observes, “Trickster is at one and the same time creator and destroyer, giver and negator, he who dumps others and who is always duped himself…He knows neither good nor evil yet he is responsible for both. He possesses no values, moral or social, is at the mercy of his passions and appetites, yet through his actions all values come into being.” Someone who is androgynous and an embodiment rather than a real body or a true spirit, Coyote outlives all sorts of socially constructed distinctions, being an all-encompassing entity that is yet more than the sum of its separate parts.

In his story “Coyote and the Enemy Aliens”, King incisively draws on the historical incident of segregation and evacuation of the Japanese immigrants by the Canadian government, against the larger backdrop of Second World War following the Pearl Harbour attack in North America. The discourse that follows between Coyote and the narrator as they visit the livestock building in Hastings Park where a large number of Japanese refugees have been hauled, is very unsettling in terms of ‘normal’ ‘smooth’ Western readership: “Boy, that Coyote likes to tell stories. Sometimes he tells stories that smell bad. Sometimes he tells stories that have been stretched. Sometimes he tells stories that bite your toes. Coyote stories”... Here, King is reconfiguring the set order, starting from naturalized sensory responses (a story ‘that smells bad’, a story whose pathos do not suffer the heart so much as it, strangely and funnily enough, ‘bites your toes’), thereby ripping apart English grammar from its socialized form. Then there is an obvious play with the English vocabulary – a chain of words arranged as if like alliteration that runs into poetry or a catch of song cycle, making the genre of representation itself uncertain: “Callous, carnage, catastrophe, chicaneary. Boy, I got to take a breath. There, that’s better. Cold-blooded, complicit, concoct, condemn. No, we are not done yet. Condescend, confabulate, confiscate, conflate, connive. No, not yet. Conspire, convolute, crazy, crooked, cruel, crush. Holy, I almost forgot cupidity”. The final onslaught with this kind of style is hurled on the picturesque fictional arrangement called ‘nation’. Canada becomes the meta-national hypothesis where the polyphonic truth of ‘many’ is silenced under the vice-grip of a mightier few, just as all the disputable words like ‘carnage’, ‘catastrophe’, ‘conspire’ and ‘cruel’ are dismissed by the ‘White Magic’ word ‘legal’:

“That legal is a good word. You can do a lot with that one. That’s one of those magic words. White magic. Legal. Lots of other White magic words. Patriotic, Good, Private, Freedom, Dignity, Efficient, Profitable, Truth, Security, National, Integrity, Public, Prosperity, Justice, Property”.

Here again, King is bouncing back to the Euro-American society the same manipulation of naming that they had previously used for marking the rituals of the
indigenous communities, often pejoratively calling their practices as ‘Black Magic’ (pp.58-59).

In his stories, conversation with Coyote, who is emblematic of an oppositional perspective, prevents the socio-politico-historical commentary from collapsing into a single point. Because King calls for the presence of more than one possibility, his story does not harp on the notion of divorce between two individual world-views; there is always a chance for ‘synthesis’ and overlapping, where the Coyote story and the Canadian story can be on the same token alike and different, as Ridington notes, “If academic theorizing is usually the product of argument and monologue, First Nations theorizing would have to be the product of conversation and dialogue.” Thus, Coyote here is an indispensable figure and what Aurylaitė would call “an actual performative “contact zone””, who breaks the control of monologue by generating a plural channel of communication, trying to build the indigenous point of view through a fair chance and equity – not by precluding the Eurocentric ‘thesis’, but rather by strengthening the indigenous ‘antithesis’ in the presence of, in spite of and in fact because of this thesis, crystallising a separate position for the latter by first defining the White Self and then negating all that is not vis-à-vis this Self.

While George L. Cornell asserts that the genuine context of the oral stories are lost once they are appropriated by the White ethnographers, because the latter tend to deform them to “products of another culture’s imagination”, according to James Ruppert, King’s narratives such as Green Grass, Running Water closely fits the category of Native Literature. Opposed to Cornell’s understanding, Green Grass Running Water allows a chance, mainly to the non-Native audience, to revisit the premises of Truth and Knowledge, thereby stressing more on how rather than what is being told. This is what Ruppert calls as the mediational text, which “endeavors to move the readers implied by the text to question the way they form knowledge and meaning, but in the end it seeks to re-educate those readers so that they can understand two codes, two traditions of discourse” (11). One might draw upon Derrida’s reflection in this context, where he says that there is a plural and paradoxical logic of the aporia that “does not oppose figures to each other, but instead installs the haunting of the one in the other.” The non-passive endurance and condition of responsibility and decision that Derrida suggests here by “aporia” is thus also an incumbent liability on King’s readers.

In a heterogeneous Canadian setting where no intrinsic sense of belonging can be justified anymore, the desire for retrieving an uncontaminated Indian truth seem puerile because the colonial reality has already amalgamated into the roots of the indigenous communities as a dissimilitude of collage. Post colonization and christianization, with the birth of several generations of cross-breeds, it is preposterous to disclaim an Indian of his ‘pure identity’ just because his archetypal linguistic traits have diluted. This is as faux as sustaining the ‘genuine Red Indian’ portfolio over a more immediate scenario of the indigenous people’s reality. It is therefore crucial to recognize that no deterministic signification can contain the discursive facets of any given people, or such interpretation risks overwhelming the actuality, as Andrew Wiget remarks: “This sublimation of authority, which derives from the recognition that we live in a world made of stories, stories which compete...
with one another for our attention, also creates a space for an Indian voice, so that instead of ‘stories about Indians’ we can create ‘an Indian’s story”’ (261). Thomas King is thus no more a Cherokee community’s mouth-piece than he is a Canadian author and no less so because his medium is an offshoot of Standard English. His broken English is a spontaneous expression of the social melange of which his intellectual edge is born, instead of being a dilution of indigeneity. As the indigenous idioms occasionally peek through the gaps of English, it seldom allows the reader to forget about its violated past through its very state of near-disappearance. Obviously this is the second best option – since the oral communities can no more gain a material ground after the script has seized the native cultures, it is better to vocalize the live everyday in a hybridized form than freeze into a museum-piece. After all, when a language is cramped from serving communication among people, it needs an ancillary trunk to communicate about them; the testimonies in the latter bring across the cause of desuetude of the former. For the muted Indian truth, broken English becomes this boon in disguise, hurled back to the White society like a boomerang.
End notes

1 In this context, critic Robin Ridington challenges the White-manufactured ken that aims to contain the Indian and his Indianness: "Indian stories are cosmic," says Coyote. "They are about goddess figures like First Woman, Changing Woman, Thought Woman and Old Woman. Whiteman's stories are fictional. They are about made-up characters like the Lone Ranger, Ishmael, Robinson Crusoe and Hawkeye." "But what happens if an Indian knows about these other guys too," I says? "What happens if Indians use microwave ovens?"..."I mean what if an Indian has read James Fenimore Cooper and Herman Melville and Northrop Frye? What if this Indian knows that Margaret Atwood wrote a book of poems called The Journals of Susanna Moodie?"" (18) Ridington thus admirably explains the impact of Thomas King’s writings that outflow the emblematic barricades created by the Euro-American stereotypes.

2 In Green Grass, Running Water, in the act of A.A.Gabriel (the Christian insignia who stands for Archangel as well as the self-help group Alcoholics Anonymous) thrusting himself on the Thought Woman and (mis)reading her ‘no’ as ‘yes’, there is at once violation (read: penetration) of culture, language and sexuality. Thomas King’s stories play a further double by repossessing the lost native heritage, where the timeless Christian myth loses its recognizable form just as apple becomes ‘mee-so’ and snake becomes ‘ju-poo-pea’.

3 What A. Irving Hallowell calls as "a higher order of objectivity" that entails “adopting a perspective which includes an analysis of the outlook of the people themselves as a complementary procedure” (Ridington 270), can hardly be found in a Euro-American narrative describing indigenous life. Ridington explains the position of the anthropologists with marked aspersions: “Anthros are good at abstract thought. Indians are good at oral thought. Walter Ong says so. He's a Jesuit and he should know. Anthros are good at theorizing. They are good at theorizing the Americanist tradition. Indians are good at being informants. Indians are the first Americans. Anthros are the first Americanists” (16).

4 In “Inconvenient Indian”, King makes fun of this strategic system of ascendancy by talking about the diverse people in his drum group: “Anishinaabe, Metis, Coastal Salish, Cree and Cherokee”…had “nothing much in common. We’re all aboriginal and we had a drum. That’s about it.” Further, “there has never been a good collective noun [to encompass the various groups] because there never was a collective to begin with”. According to King, “Indian” is thus “the one name to rule them all.” His spotting every Euro-American as “White” becomes an imitative act of this same desecration.

5 While Teresa Gibert explores King’s literature in terms of the “basic traditional oral narrative devices, such as word-repetitions, gaps, discontinuities, and a phatic rhetoric of address” (74), according to critics Tataryn and Gingell, the fragmentary syntax and non-standard grammar in King’s works “are arguably a stylistic synecdoche for a working or underclass-based ethnicized lect” (6).

6 Critic Sharon M. Bailey reflects: “However, even though the Native oral text, recreated by the dialogue-like narrative structure, effectively undermines the authority of the written texts, it is unable to assume for itself that authority. The same forces that are set to work undermining the authority of written works ultimately destroy the authority of the oral work as well. The
retelling of the myths does not mean anything that could be articulated as Native American truth(s)”.

7 Coyote also reminds us of what Homi Bhabha would argue as the possibility “to redeem the pathos of cultural confusion into a strategy of political subversion”, an “ambivalent identification” that is used “audaciously to announce the important artifice of cultural identity and its difference”. Rejecting any essentialism for a diverse range of subjectivities, Coyote becomes an empty sign of (Bhaba) the “dialogic position of calculation, negotiation, interrogation” and enacts mimicry, hybridity and sly civility while resisting any form of teleology and holism.

8 As the trickster’s social functions are associated by scholars with ‘counter-discourse’, ‘reverse-discourse’, ‘counter-memory’, or ‘counter-narratives’ – terms denoting the deployment of dominant discourse conventions otherwise, the trickster stories are meant to (Davidson, Walton and Andrews) “offer an outlet for voicing protest, provide a source of entertainment and release, and provoke a re-examination of existing conditions…[which may lead] to change”. Stewart concludes that it is because Coyote cannot be identified precisely with any tactile being in the real world that its virtual magical character is so effective as a subversive device – “while functioning outside the constraints of conventional systems of meaning, they at the same time draw attention to the arbitrary nature of such systems.”
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