

“We Story Them”: Thomas King’s Rhetorical Approach to the De-Othering and Re-Storying of  
First Nations People

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Indian people don't really instruct their children, they story them - that is, not only tell them stories, but encourage them to hear and see the stories of the world around them.

--- Kimberly Blaeser, "Centering Words: Writing a Sense of Place"

The truth about stories is that that's all we are.

--- Thomas King, *The Truth About Stories*

Canadian First Nations people have always been cast as the Other, as the colonized, by caucasian Canadian society: they are the depraved, the damned, the conquered, and the inferior. This image has been adjusted from century to century to suit society's needs. As a result, Native people have been prevented from forming their own identities. Thomas King, in *The Truth About Stories*, tells stories, drawing upon his upbringing and life experiences while exploring the many stereotypes that have been historically attached to North American indigenous peoples. Stories are powerful and influential, often containing morals and truths that cannot otherwise be expressed. Because King employs the cyclical narrative frame used by Native American storytellers, the narrative structure grounds *The Truth About Stories* in aboriginal tradition; however, the Native issues that King's lectures touch on, while they plague the identity of the Native population, are not a matter for Native people alone. Rather, it is a global issue that indigenous peoples have been viewed as inferior by European colonial regimes. They have been slaughtered on a massive scale, removed from the lands that are rightfully theirs; ignored, forgotten, and terminated because they are seen as having no value in Western capitalist society. Money, rather than people and land, is valuable. King, through his stories, demonstrates that the tie indigenous peoples have to land is far more valuable than the capital such land may produce. King advocates tolerance, respect, and responsibility, echoing Fanon's plea for a new man in *The Wretched of the Earth*: the new man will learn from "the racial hatred, slavery, exploitation and, above all, the bloodless genocide[s]" that have occurred (238). To change the story is to change

the conception of the Indian, thus freeing Native American people from the cage society has placed them in. I argue that through the process of Othering, First Nations people have become conquered, controlled, and damned in the mindset of Canadian society. Native people have undergone several different means, or forms, of Othering: the savage, the noble Indian, the dying Indian, the national Indian, and the native without value. In his writing, King hopes to develop a narrative habitus through the practice of re-storying the Indian in which First Nations people are no longer the Other. His writing advocates a re-storying removes the colonial imperialist view Canadian society has ascribed to the native people.

The racism that the Native American population of Canada are confronting, from the effects of residential schools to the stereotypes that have been perpetrated in society, literature, and film, are not a “Native issue.” Rather, because “every citizen of a nation is responsible for the acts perpetrated in the name of that nation” (Fanon 72), the repercussions of the dominance of caucasians over Native people are the responsibility of all Canadians and all humans. In his apology to the former students of Indian Residential Schools, their descendants, and all First Nations people, Prime Minister Stephen Harper places responsibility on the shoulders of everyone:

The burden of this experience has been on your shoulders for far too long. The burden is properly ours as a Government, and as a country. There is no place in Canada for the attitudes that inspired the Indian Residential Schools system to ever prevail again. You have been working on recovering from this experience for a long time and in a very real sense, we are now joining you on this journey. The Government of Canada sincerely apologizes and asks the forgiveness of the Aboriginal peoples of this country for failing them so profoundly. (11 June, 2008)

Furthermore, as Richard Wagamese states in *One Native Life*, “We’re all neighbours: that’s the reality. The land has the potential for social greatness. And within this cultural mosaic lies the essential ingredient of freedom - acceptance” (4). Wagamese and Harper challenge Canadians’ colonial history and racial prejudice by advocating awareness and change. Similarly, at the end of each lecture, King places responsibility on all Canadians to change the story from blatant racism to acceptance with his refrain: “don’t say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story. You’ve heard it now” (*Stories* 29). By placing responsibility for change in the hands of everyone through the telling of stories, King makes the othering of the Native American peoples public: in this way, concern for the misconceptions, misinterpretations, and stereotypes constructing the Native American as Other is not left to the subaltern alone. Instead, it is everyone’s responsibility.

Decolonization is a global project involving interlinked forms of oppression. Bell Hooks argues, in *Cultural Criticism and Transformation*, that she began to use the phrase “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” because she wanted to synthesize this interconnection:

I wanted to have some language that would actually remind us continually of the interlocking systems of domination that define our reality and not to just have one thing be like, you know, gender is the important issue, race is the important issue, but for me the use of that particular jargonistic phrase was a way, a sort of short cut way of saying all of these things actually are functioning simultaneously at all times in our lives. (4:37-5:14)

Hooks suggests that oppression persists in all levels of culture, having presence in pop culture, media, and social interactions. By “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy,” Hooks is referring to the societies in which systems of dominance are allowed to govern interactions and relations. In

global terms today, many of these societies are colonized ones. As Edward Said argues, we “are at a point in our work when we can no longer ignore empires and the imperial context in our studies” (5 *Culture and Imperialism*).

To view another human being or group as Other is “to conceptualize (a people, a group, etc.) as excluded and intrinsically different from oneself” (“other, v.”. OED Online. September 2004. Oxford University Press. 5 March 2013). When explorers reached Canada, King argues their accounts of their relations with Native peoples were reported on in “generally good terms”; however, colonizers, “who had to live with Indians, were more disposed to dwell on what they saw as the darker side of Native character” (*Inconvenient* 23). This darker side of Native character is, according to King, what Europeans and caucasian North Americans have used to validate their casting of the Native people as Other. Europeans saw through a lens that enforced the “basic dichotomy that framed their world, a world that was either light or dark, good or evil, civilized or savage” (23). Although this dichotomy is not demonstrated in Native society and thought, Western society forced the dichotomy upon Native people. Only the Western intellectual could define the Oriental; Edward Said argues, in *Orientalism*, that the colonized Other has “a kind of extrareal, phenomenologically reduced status that puts them out of reach of everyone except the Western expert. From the beginning of Western speculation about the Orient, the one thing the Orient could not do was to represent itself” (283). The Other, to the white man, is “the unidentifiable, the unassailable” (139 *Skins* footnote 25), paralleled by the construction of the Indian Other in North American culture. Native people are considered as unable to represent themselves and are thought of as only understood from the outside. Through a lens of dominance, colonized people have become designated as the subaltern: this is “a way to

designate the colonial subject that has been constructed by European discourse and internalized by colonial peoples” (*A Glossary of Literary Terms* 277).

Spivak argues, in “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” that in the “project to constitute the colonial subject as Other” (76), these subjects have become the “men and women among the illiterate peasantry, the tribals, the lowest strata of the urban subproletariat” (78). These people among the lowest strata are the most deprived and conquered Other: they are the subaltern, the lowest of the low within society.<sup>1</sup> They are the inferior, the silenced people whose knowledge has been deemed inadequate: they are seen as possessing “naive knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity” (Foucault qtd. by Spivak on 76). Spivak takes her analysis of decolonization further, arguing that if “in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow” (82-3). This deep shadow is due to the “ideological construction of gender” which places the colonized male subject above the colonized female (82). The Native American female, then, is the lowest of the low in North American society, as she is the colonized, the Other, the silenced, and the subaltern female. Although “the oppressed, if given the chance [ . . . ] *can speak and know their conditions*” (78 original italics), Spivak argues that their voices have been silenced by “the first-world intellectual masquerading as the absent nonrepresenter who lets the oppressed speak for themselves” (87). These first-world intellectuals depict “the colonial subject as Other” (76). Spivak argues that the Other is reinscribed through the “program” of the “benevolent *Western* intellectual” (87 original italics) rather than deconstructed because the transparency that Western intellectuals assume is impossible: “the assumption and construction of a consciousness or subject sustains such works and will, in the long run, cohere with the work of imperialist subject-constitution [ . . . ] And the subaltern woman

will be as mute as ever” (90). Spivak argues that “the subject of exploitation cannot know and speak the text of female exploitation even if the absurdity of the nonrepresenting intellectual making space for her to speak is achieved” (84). Therefore, by assuming the consciousness of the subaltern [woman], benevolent Western intellectuals reinscribe and produce the imperialist views they claim to be working against. Thus, benevolent intellectuals re-assert their racial, gender, cultural, and class dominance rather than dismantling colonial views.

Spivak argues that the intellectuals’ self representation as transparent is self-serving rather than genuine. In the act of assuming transparency, those who speak for the subaltern reinscribe interlocked Western oppressions and, rather than removing society’s stereotypes, contrive new ones (70-72). Although Spivak argues that the mission of speaking for the subaltern subject is “a program for the benevolent *Western* intellectual” (87 original italics), I am not tackling King’s writing and the identity of North American people in a benevolent manner. Benevolence assumes a charitable disposition towards the subject, which Native people do not need: I will not patronize them by assuming a tone of condescension. While I am presenting my worldview, necessarily, I am not producing an interpretation that the subaltern [North American people] cannot obtain themselves. Rather, I am interpreting the content of King’s *The Truth About Stories* as a female caucasian Canadian citizen who, as Harper and Wagamese insist, has a responsibility to contribute to decolonization. I do not presume to offer recognition to the Native from the privileged social position of the caucasian; nor do I attempt the fraudulent rhetorical move of being a mirror to reflect either the unitary generalized Indian or the uniqueness of the indigenous individual. I propose no totalizing definition of the aboriginal, nor do I pose as a psychologist; rather, I seek to articulate and explain Thomas King’s call for a re-storying of Canadian social values, and, in doing so, to contribute to creating the possibility of a healthy

encounter between the aboriginal and the caucasian and for that matter, between all Canadians. My argument supports a healthy social encounter between people of many cultures; the hearing of many voices in a multicultural society.

The means of Othering are those ideas, definitions, and images which have shackled First Nations people as Other in Canadian society. In his writing, King demonstrates how society has adapted the conception of the native Other to suit the nation's need: King argues that First Nations people, in being viewed as entertainment, lost their rights and roles in society and were made complicit in this conception. Throughout his writing, King uses characters that recur in Native American storytelling; for instance, the character of Coyote in King's story about Coyote and the ducks. Coyote is a trickster character - "half creator, half fool" who "survives partly out of luck, partly out of cunning, and partly because" of his "great creative prowess" (Allen 158). Coyote is "renowned for greediness and salaciousness," and he [or she in some cases] acts as "a metaphor for all the foolishness and anger that have characterized the America Indian life in the centuries since invasion" (158). King's story is resistance narrative in the sheep's clothing of entertainment. Coyote becomes jealous of the ducks' beautiful feathers and cunningly deceives them into giving him half: Coyote tells the ducks that he has come to protect them from human beings, who "plan to steal all [the ducks'] feathers" (*Stories* 124-5). To save them, Coyote suggests that "You [the ducks] give me half of your feathers and I'll pretend to be a Duck and I'll let the Human Beings chase me around until they get tired and give up" (125). Coyote soon destroys the feathers, and, when he comes back for more — claiming that the humans caught him and took his feathers — the ducks ask "These Human Beings [. . .] what is it about us that they don't like?" to which Coyote replies, "Oh, they like you well enough [. . .] They just like your feathers better" (127). King uses the ducks to represent Native people and feathers as a symbol



for land, demonstrating that caucasian people like the Natives well enough, but they like the Natives' land better. In *The Inconvenient Indian*, King delves into the argument that caucasian people are seeking Native land. King argues that all of the attempts white people have made to make Indians disappear - from assimilation to residential schools - have been efforts to obtain land. He explains "What do Whites want? The answer is simple, and it's been in plain sight all along. Land. Whites want land" (216). Native people view the land in much the same way as the ducks view their feathers in King's story, as part of themselves. In multicultural contemporary Canadian society, First Nations people have, King implies satirically, assumed the role of providing entertainment by reminding caucasian Canadians that land is not just a source of money. If the humans kill them, the ducks ask who will sing for the humans: "Who will dance for them? Who will remind them of their relationship to the earth?" (125). Native people are the tie to the land that is missing from caucasian thought. In *All My Relations*, King suggests that the Native worldview is one in which we are reminded of the relationship we have to our family and relatives as well as "the extended relationship we share with all human beings" (ix). Within this universal relationship, there is an implicit responsibility to live "in a harmonious and moral manner" (ix). This harmonious manner King identifies pertains to the land as well as to other beings.

The closeness the Indian has with the earth is "not a quaint result of savagism or childlike naivete"; rather, "an Indian, at the deepest level of being, assumes that the earth is alive in the same sense that human beings are alive" (Allen 70). The Indian respects and reveres nature in a way that caucasians do not. As Franz Fanon argues in the context of Algerian colonization: "The white man wants the world; he wants it for himself. He discovers he is the predestined master of the world. He enslaves it" (*Masks* 107). The white man implicitly wants to own the earth and

control it, which King demonstrates throughout *The Inconvenient Indian*. King argues that land contains the language, stories, and histories of Native people, and “has always been a defining element in Aboriginal culture” (218). While land is home for Aboriginal people, to caucasian society, “land is primarily a commodity, something that has value for what you can take from it or what you can get for it” (218). Monetary value is an idea central to Westernized life, which King humorously demonstrates in *A Coyote Columbus Story*. In this modern take on Columbus’s discovery of North America, Coyote seeks people — through songs and thinking — to play baseball with. First she makes Native people, but Coyote cheats at the game, so the Natives “find better things to do” (7). When she tries again, Coyote makes Columbus, but Columbus and his companions are “too busy running around looking for India. Looking for stuff they can sell” (15). Coyote reflects “I must have sung that song wrong. Maybe I didn’t do the right dance. Maybe I thought too hard. These people I made have no manners” (14). Coyotes’ assessment that Columbus has “no manners” is particularly ironic in King’s story because Coyote herself lacks manners, as is evident when she cheats at baseball. Soon Columbus looks at the Natives and says “I’ll bet we can sell these Indians” (18). Although this “bad idea is full of bad manners” (19), Coyote does not stop them. The Westernized equation of moral value to market value is highlighted as “mad manners” in this tale because it completely disregards human rights. The value of the human is subliminal and goes unnoticed.

The contrast between social or economic value versus human value is explicitly commented upon by King’s story of his own experience of culling deer. Paul Gibson, the young man who works with King culling deer, says “There are things that have value [ . . . ] and there are things that don’t, and the trick to happiness is knowing which one you are” (138). Gibson explains that, although both sheep and deer “eat the vegetation and can cause erosion that will

ruin the forest industry,” sheep “have value and deer don’t, so that’s why we shoot them” (138). Gibson says to King, “I don’t have no value. That’s why I stay here and hunt the deer. What about you?” (138). King is horrified by Gibson’s acceptance of socially accepted value as more important than human value, which is reminiscent of the value of money that Columbus places over the humanity of the Native people in *A Coyote Columbus Story*. King responds to Gibson’s question: “I told him I thought I had value” (139). Gibson, being a man who has accepted a colonial and racist definition of human values, associates King with the Maoris [the indigenous Polynesian people of New Zealand] and concludes that King “and the deer should get along just fine” (139). Gibson implicitly suggests that King, like the Maoris and the deer, has no value in the eyes of society. King implies sardonically that he left deer culling because of his starkly different perspective on the value of human and animal life (146).

Value, to Westernized societies, is like the understanding of “value” ascribed to Columbus in *A Coyote Columbus Story* — essentially a matter of money, which is strongly linked to private ownership of land. King argues that the General Allotment Act of 1887 was a “new and improved effort at assimilating Indians” because it removed collective ownership of tribal land: “Indians, through inclination and treaty, held land in common,” but because land “gave an individual station within society and was a certain source of wealth,” caucasians decided that “land was too important to be left in the hands of a community that had no real sense of its value” (*Inconvenient* 129). King summarizes the goal of the General Allotment Act as turning Native people into landowners in order to hurry them into the mainstream as full and functioning members of capitalist society (*Stories* 131). The key to being a fully functional citizen in a civilized society was therefore recognized as “private ownership of land and an appreciation for the concept of profit” (131): capitalism. Reservations became viewed as an

affront to capitalism, and it was believed that “Private ownership of land would free Indians from the tyranny of the tribe and traditional Native culture, and civilize the savage” (131). By removing communal tribal land, however, Westerners were not only promoting capitalism: they were also destroying Native culture. Other legislation also sought to separate the Indian from his or her culture. The U.S Congress passed House Concurrent Resolution 108 in 1953, which sought to abolish Indians through “terminating federal treaty obligations and special concessions to all tribes, dismantling reservations and ‘liberating’ Native people from poverty and exclusion” by moving them to places where “assimilation would be quick and painless” (*Stories* 136). Through this act, the American government gained land and sought to reduce costs in social services to Native people. Canada, in 1969, followed suit with Trudeau's White Paper, which was “essentially a carbon copy” of the American document (137).

King points out that Native people have endured several forms of termination governance. Such legislation had “two basic goals. One, to relieve [Native people] of [their] land, and two, to legalize [them] out of existence” (130). Residential schools extended this effort in the direction of re-education. Richard Wagamese, in his memoir *One Native Life*, reflects on being raised by parents who “had the Indian stripped out of them by residential schools” (237). Wagamese’s parents were “told that their beliefs were wrong [. . .] that nothing in their worldview held any more [and] they were told that to live as savages was an abomination they needed to be cleansed of” (238). To exorcise the demons that arose in them from residential schools, Wagamese’s parents drank: this was “to mute the ache of whips and beatings and abuse” (238). In February of 1958, Wagamese’ parents, who were never taught parenting skills and were separated from their own families at a young age, went to town to sell furs, got drunk, and forgot about their children. Wagamese and his siblings were found almost frozen to death and were

turned over to the Children's Aid Society. Wagamese admits that "My family has never acknowledged the truth, and they never will: they got drunk and forgot about us" (239). He also argues that "Owning that hurts too much, and dealing with hurt was not something they were taught in those schools supposedly meant to save them" (239). In this critique, Wagamese argues that his parents are not fully responsible for their actions as a result of the way they were treated in schools "meant to save them" as children. Furthermore, as a young child, Wagamese was beaten by his aunt Elizabeth until his back was raw and his shoulder and arm were broken; also, his uncle tried to drown him (241-42). These horrors were the after-effects of residential schools.

Relocation was also a method used to deal with the "Indian problem" in both Canada and the United States. In 1942, 2,000 Mi'kmaq people living in Nova Scotia were relocated to two large settlements at Eskasoni and Shubenacadie. The residents at these settlements "weren't keen about a large influx of new residents, and the Mi'kmaq who were to be relocated weren't keen on moving" (*Inconvenient* 93). Both sides wrote letters and protested, but both were ignored. This centralization was supposedly going to "cut costs" but did not guarantee quality of life. By 1944, only ten new houses had been built; by 1946, "many of the families who had been moved to the two reserves were still living in tents"; and by 1948, unemployment was rampant and "the entire community was on welfare" (94). Relocation then continued following World War II because the government needed the Native land for a hydro-electric dam. Even though there were suitable non-Native sites available, "The Army Corps of Engineers, in particular, was able to determine with amazing regularity that the best sites for dams just happened to be on Indian land" (95). For example, under the Flood Control Act of 1944, the Pick-Sloan Plan resulted in the flooding of "over two dozen tribes whose lands lay along the river in the Missouri River basin" while avoiding "flooding any of the non-Indian towns along the Missouri" (96). King argues that

“removals and relocations, as federal policies in both [Canada and the United States], allowed Whites to steal Aboriginal land” (97). Each treaty and agreement that the Native people signed resulted in the loss of land due to the monetary gain caucasian society saw in the acquisition of Native land for varying projects.

For instance, in 1868, a treaty which “guaranteed that the Black Hills would remain with the Lakota Nation” was signed, but when gold was discovered in the Black Hills at French Creek, white miners over-ran the land (*Inconvenient* 220). In 1875, the Lakota asked to have the prospectors removed, but President Grant’s “administration told the Lakota that a new treaty was needed, one in which the Lakota would have to give up all claim to the Black Hills for the princely sum of \$25,000” (221). The tribe refused. Between 1927 and 1941, American sculptor Gutzon Borglum carved the faces of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt, and Abraham Lincoln into Six Grandfathers, a mountain in the Black Hills which, after the carvings, became Mount Rushmore. In 1980, the Supreme Court ruled that the land had been taken illegally. The solution was to pay the tribe “the original purchase price of \$25,000 plus interest,” which amounted to over \$106 million (221-2). Rather than give the land back, the government wanted to own the land, as Mount Rushmore is a profitable tourist attraction. The tribe refused. King concludes that “the Lakota have never given up their claim to the Hills, nor have they stopped fighting for the land’s return,” because they value the land more than money (221-2). Instead, the money “stays in an interest-bearing bank account to this day” (222).

Land along the Ottawa River, which belonged to the Mohawk people, was given to the Sulpician Missionary Society in 1717 and turned into a nine-hole golf course in 1959. Then in 1989 an announcement was made concerning the course’s expansion into an eighteen-hole course with “sixty luxury condominiums” (232-34). On March 10th, 1990, the Oka Crisis began:

the land was occupied by Native people protecting their trees and their ancient graveyard. The occupation then turned into a shooting war when Jean Ouellette, rather than talk to the Native people, called in the Surete du Quebec (234). Mohawk elder Joe Armstrong suffered a fatal heart attack trying to escape a mob, and Corpral Marcel Lemay was fatally wounded. The Mohawk people eventually got their land back at the cost of \$200 million to the Canadian government (235). This struggle was the direct result of Native people being ignored and thought of as pests rather than as a population who matter.

In the case of Gwaii Haanas, King concedes that indigenous attachment to the land was understood (251). In the 1980's, loggers turned their attention to the timber on the island. The Haida people living in the territory prevented the loggers, and there was an amiable protest: for "twenty-one months, the Haida, the loggers, the environmentalists, and the police moved back and forth among each other, arguing jobs, culture, land claims, environmentalism, and the law" (251). In July of 1987, the territory officially became Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve and Haida Heritage Site (251). The timber and the money were not nearly as important to the Natives as the land itself, a sentiment which capitalist caucasian society does not understand. Yet as King says, "all you have to do is stand at the ocean's edge with the cedars at your back and the sky on your shoulders, and you will know" (252).

King argues that after land treaties, relocation, residential schools, and the abolition of communal land failed to assimilate Indigenous peoples, Canada and The United States turned to legally re-defining Aboriginal people out of existence. The Indian Arts and Crafts Act (American) and Bill C-31 (Canadian) - ask "Whom will we allow to be an Indian?" (*Stories* 139). In both *The Truth About Stories* and *The Inconvenient Indian*, King argues that the rules and regulations concerning who can be Indian and who cannot be Indian are attempts to legalize

the Indian out of existence. The Canadian Bill C-31 “allowed Native women who had lost status” due to marrying a non-status person to regain status. Yet it also contains a two-generation cut-off clause that makes children, rather than adults, lose status through marriage: when status adults marry out of status for two generations, the children lose status and can never gain that status back (*Stories* 140-143). Therefore, due to marriages between status Indians and non-status people, this two generation cut-off clause ensures that “in fifty to seventy-five years there will be no status Indians left in Canada” (144). This legislation will also have “the unforgivable consequence of setting Native against Native, destroying [their] ability and desire to associate with each other”: they have made “us our own enemy,” King argues (149). One of the ways in which these bills turned Native people against themselves is through the limit tribes have been forced to place on membership due to the finite land base and the limited financial resources that Native people control (*Inconvenient* 205). The issue of authenticity then arises because it is a guideline used for determining who is Indian, a guideline King warns is “fraught with dangerous assumptions and consequences” (205).

The question of authenticity, King demonstrates, was developed by non-natives through preconceptions concerning the image of the Indian. Although the Indian had “an exotic, erotic, terrifying presence,” North America adopted the fabricated image of the “wild, free, powerful, noble, handsome, philosophical, eloquent, solitary [male] Indian” (*Stories* 79). North America was looking for an Indian to represent all Indians, a mythic figure who “could reflect the strength and freedom of an emerging continent” (79). King calls this mythic figure “A National Indian” (79) on account of this construct being adopted as a figurehead for domestic issues North America was searching for. For instance, in 1773, members of the Boston Tea Party, “disgusted by the tax that the crown had placed on tea,” displayed their displeasure by “dressing up like



Indians and dumping tea in the bay” (80). The image of the Indian was also used by colonists to petition the Mast Tree Law, which allowed for any tree suitable for masts to be cut down. The colonists showed their dissent by dressing as Indians with “blankets, feathers, painted face, [and] war clubs” (80). They adopted the image of the Indian to anchor their cause in an ancestry that predated the British laws imposed on them. Some groups “painted their faces like real Indians, walked in single file like real Indians, smoked the peace pipe like real Indians, were given Indian names,” and even “talked like real Indians” (82). The real Indian, however, made this National Indian problematic because “real Indians were being obstinate” about colonial dominance (82). As a result, the stereotype of the vanishing Indian replaced the National Indian.

In his discussion of Edward Sheriff Curtis’s “project of photographing the Indians of North America,” in which Curtis aimed to “capture that idea, that image [of the Indian] before it vanished,” King explores the fascination with the conceptualization of the Indian as “vanishing” (*Stories* 32). This was a “concern among many [. . .] at the turn of the nineteenth century,” as North Americans chose to believe that, “while Europeans in the New World were poised on the brink of a new adventure, the Indian was poised on the brink of extinction” (32-33). Due to this impending “extinction,” the Indian became romanticized: through the “literature produced during the nineteenth century,” the death of the Indian became the second most poetic topic in the world, second only to “the death of a beautiful woman” (33). The vanishing image led to the romanticized image of the “noble” Indian in the literature of the nineteenth century; an image of “a semi-historic Indian who was a friend to the White man, who was strong, brave, honest” and, above all, noble (82). Conventionally, caucasians also conceived the “noble savage” in terms that caucasians could understand”: he or she was a “figure who kept his [or her] clothes on and who spoke reasonable English” (82):

Dead Indians are dignified, noble, silent, suitably garbed. And dead. Live Indians are invisible, unruly, disappointing. And breathing. One is a romantic reminder of a heroic but fictional past. The other is simply an unpleasant, contemporary surprise.

*(Inconvenient 66)*

Through literature, the Indian was constructed as “either noble or savage” in the 19th Century (*Stories* 103). James Fenimore Cooper, in *The Deerslayer*, contrasted Native “gifts” with caucasian “gifts,” highlighting the “characteristics” that constructed the Indian as savage. Cooper’s character, the Deerslayer, argues that “revenge is an Indian gift and forgiveness is a White gift”; that “Indians have devious natures, while Whites believe the best of a person” (104). In summary, “White gifts in Cooper’s novel are gifts of Reason” while Indian gifts are those of instinct (105). These “gifts” that Cooper proposed cast Native people as heathen savages, conceptualizing the Native as part of the wilderness rather than as part of civilization.

In his photographs, Curtis was looking for the “literary Indian, the dying Indian, the imaginative construct” (34). Often Indians were not those that the image of the “vanishing” Indian fabricated, so Curtis would take “boxes of ‘Indian’ paraphernalia — wigs, blankets, painted backdrops, clothing — in case he ran into Indians who did not look as the Indian was supposed to look” (34). Curtis “paid Indians to shave away any facial hair” and to wear wigs to “look authentic” (36). In this way, the Indian became simply a construct in the mind of North Americans. Curtis “authenticated” the Indian by making those he photographed conform to the image of the romanticized noble, dying Indian.<sup>ii</sup>

In 1995, King and his brother set out to reveal how this process of inventing the Indian works through their own mission to photograph the Indian. They did this so that when the millennium came about, they would have “a terrific coffee-table book to welcome the next

thousand years” (32). Their project is vindicated by the Will Rogers museum near Claremore, Oklahoma in which the statue of Will Rogers twirling a rope creates the false conception that Rogers is “some kind of famous cowboy,” when Rogers is, in fact, a native man (41). Rogers straddles the Indian-Cowboy dichotomy, subverting expectations and supporting the goal that King and his brother set out with, to reveal how the Indian is re-defined by caucasian perceptions. In the dichotomy Rogers straddles, to not look Indian is to not be Indian; thus, creating an identity struggle.

The Lone Ranger is also a figure who struggles with identity confinement. Since The Lone Ranger “never took off his mask” and “had no identity other than the mask” (*Lone Ranger* 57), The Lone Ranger embodies the stereotypes that have been forced upon Native people. To subvert the power that the mask connotes, King undertook photographing Native artists in Lone Ranger masks: “Within the frontier myth, Indians are most often villains and cowboys are most often heroes. An Indian in a Lone Ranger mask was a contradiction at best” (58). King, surprised at the response his photographs receive, argues that rather than emphasize the Native behind the mask, focus was placed on the mask itself:

I had expected to be asked about the artists. Who was that masked . . . person? A painter? A weaver? A writer? A dancer, perhaps, or a carver? Who were their people, their relations? Where were they from? I hadn’t expected that all they would see was the mask. (58)

Caucasian society prefers to focus on the societal image of the caucasian hero rather than to expand its metanarrative<sup>iii</sup> by recognizing the alternative reality of the native artist and what he or she represents.

Although King attempts to defy the generalizations that the mask connotes, he finds that no one is willing to look underneath the mask. Because King is unable to subvert the power of the mask, his story demonstrates that expectations of identity, or stereotypes, can only be subverted when they are acknowledged as such. Those viewing the photographs suggested that it was the mask that made the photographs great — “They’re clever, they all told me. It’s the mask that does it” (59) — rather than the subject behind it. The loss of identity that the Native people have experienced by living hidden behind caucasian masks can only be remedied by removing the masks and revealing the individual identities behind them.<sup>iv</sup>

Said argues in *Orientalism*, that the creators of such an image assume a preceding knowledge that makes them more informed than the subjects themselves:

Every writer on the Orient [. . .] assumes some Oriental precedent, some previous knowledge of the Orient, to which he refers and on which he relies. Additionally, each work on the Orient affiliates itself with other works, with audiences, with institutions, with the Orient itself. The ensemble of relationships between works, audiences, and some particular aspects of the Orient therefore constitutes an analyzable formation - for example, that of philological studies, of anthologies of extracts from Oriental literature, of travel books, of Oriental fantasies - whose presence in time, in discourse, in institutions (schools, libraries, foreign services) gives it strength and authority. (20)

The same has been true of Native American people. In *The Truth About Stories*, King demonstrates that caucasians have internalized the false image of the Indian that caucasian writers on Native people have formulated. When King is headed to New Zealand on the *SS Cap Colorado*, the German cook, who had read all of German author Karl May’s novels and thus

thought he had a fair idea of what Indians were supposed to look like, tells King, “You’re not the Indian I had in mind” (*Stories* 48). Although May “had never seen an Indian,” his depiction was internalized by readers and thus became true (48). The concept of race itself is a similar fictional societal construct that, through internalization, has become true.

King’s boyhood experience of being taken as Mexican occurs when he asks an attractive middle-class girl, Karen Butler, to be his prom date. Karen at first agrees, but then declines, saying that her father “doesn’t want [her] dating Mexicans” (*Stories* 39-40). In this humorous tale, King subtly draws on the construct of race, which, although it can be “dead quiet on occasions,” is often dangerous (39):

Never mind that it does not exist in either biology or theology, though both have, from time to time, been enlisted in the cause of racism, Never mind that we can’t hear it or smell it or taste it or feel it. The important thing is we believe we can see it. (44)

The racism King experiences in being rejected based on racial classifications is insulting, and to be classified incorrectly is further degrading. King’s memory shows how appearance becomes central to identity because it is how individuals are categorized: King did not dress as a “Native,” therefore, he was not Native. Instead, he was Mexican. The illusion of race and the importance of appearance define King as a youth in the eyes of others (40). To be correctly classified, King’s style changed. As a college activist, King began to dress “in a manner to substantiate the cultural lie that had trapped [him]” (46). To prevent being mistaken as “a Mexican or a White,” King adorned himself with “trinkets of the trade” characteristic of Native activists: he “grew [his] hair long, bought a fringe leather pouch to hang off [his] belt, threw a four-strand bone choker around [his] neck, made a headband out of an old neckerchief, and strapped on a beaded belt buckle” (45-6). However, this appearance has many negative connotations.

As an activist, King finds that allowing himself to be defined by the eyes of others is ultimately self-defeating. When he speaks at a Washington conference, King's story is well received by the audience; he is given a standing ovation, and a few people tear up. But his speech is not viewed in the same way as the professionals' presentations: King is not paid, while the government officials from Washington are. King is seen as the entertainment, not a professional. Inverting his image from that of the colonized to that of the colonizer, King arrives "at the next confrontation virtually indistinguishable from the boys from Washington" (*Stories* 67). As a result, after his presentation, King is accused of being an "apple": red on the outside but white on the inside. King finds that the dichotomy of colonizer and colonized leaves him no room to be an individual:

As long as I dressed like an Indian and complained like an Indian, I was entertainment. But if I dressed like a non-Indian and reasoned like a non-Indian, then not only was I not entertainment, I wasn't Indian. (68)

King refers to performer Pauline E. Johnson in *The Truth About Stories* as someone trapped in the same dichotomy. In the first half of her show, Johnson wore a "Native-inspired outfit complete with fur pelts, wampum belts, her father's hunting knife, and a scalp she was given by a Blackfoot chief" (85). Johnson would then switch to a Westernized evening gown for the second half, thus "providing the audience with the Native exoticism they craved and the English sophistication they trusted" (86). Johnson was a performer and intended to entertain; however, her persona as a performer was influenced by the expectations and conceptions of caucasian society: when she tried to reverse the order of the roles, appearing first as Westernized and as Indian later, it "was not as popular because it inverted and challenged the idea of order and progress that Western civilization had decreed" (86). Her behaviour, then, must correlate with

the expectations that are placed on her identity both as a performer and as an Indian. Her identity as an individual is discarded in the process.

At the conference in Washington, King demonstrates the crushing power of politics on identity. King tells the story of Ishi, a literally dying Indian found in 1911 when Natives had been persecuted. Two anthropologists “save” Ishi from imprisonment, employing him as a janitor in the Anthropological Museum at the University of California, San Francisco. Ishi was displayed as “Indian” and demonstrated Indian arts, such as arrow making and the preparation of hides (65). The people at the museum “were inordinately fond of pointing out that Ishi was, in fact, free to return” home but did not (65). They ignored that there was no home for Ishi anymore. Instead of leaving, Ishi stayed at the museum “until his own death because he had nowhere to go” (65). King uses Ishi to exemplify the disaster that can befall an individual caught in the caucasian-Indian dichotomy. Richard Wagamese, author of *One Native Life*, also gets caught between “playing Indian” for society and being himself: while employed as a journalist, Wagamese is called “Super Injun” for wearing a “beaded vest, moccasins, [having] long hair, and turquoise rings” (131). To escape the dichotomy, Wagamese internalizes his identity rather than depicting the image society expects of him. In this way, Wagamese’s identity starts “from the inside” (131). Although Wagamese escapes the generalized identity of “Indian” that Ishi was forced to adopt, many Native people are struggling to escape societal expectations.

Throughout history, Native American peoples have become generalized and oppressed by society; Curtis’s method of “authenticating” his subjects by dressing them in Indian paraphernalia removed their identities. King collects postcards depicting “Indians or Indian subjects,” many of whom are unnamed. They are simply Indian. For instance, his favorite is a picturesque setting of the Banff mountain golf course in which two locals, Jim Brewster and

Norman Luxton, are caddying for “five Indians who are identified as ‘two Stoney Indian Chiefs’” (*Stories* 35). The caucasian North Americans are named, while the Indians are not individualized: instead, their identities are removed, and they are generalized as Indians. If they had been given identities, they would have been revealed as real people, which would have been “a violation of the physical laws governing matter and antimatter, that the Indian and Indians cannot exist in the same imagination” (36).

Although nothing has changed for the Indian in the last few centuries, King and Wagamese offer hope. In King’s *The Truth About Stories*, responsibility is placed on the listeners to take King’s stories and do something with what they have heard: “don’t say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story” (29). This responsibility implicitly evokes an active role in de-colonizing the native people. Differences will remain: “There will always be cowboys and Indians, just as there will always be blacks and whites, Hispanics and Asians, engineers and labourers, professionals and dishwashers” (Wagamese 89). But the crucial question is how these differences are treated. Wagamese suggests that “differences make us stronger, but what pulls us together, ties us into a shared destiny, is the straining of our human hearts - the secret wish for a common practical magic” (89). This practical magic is a matter of mutual acceptance, shared humanity, and shared responsibility for social justice and the well-being of all citizens. A healthy interaction will involve polyphony, the blending of many voices [or stories] to create a harmony in which each voice [or story] is still distinct.

In Arthur Frank’s *letting stories breathe*, polyphony, the harmonious blending of multiple voices in music, has the ability to make dialogical truths more accurate. Voices blended in stories may merge, but they “retain some distinctiveness” because they represent experiences and



opinions as well as characters (41). In society, polyphony is composed of a “variety of social dialects derived from parents, clan, class, religion, and country” (Booth qtd. by Frank on 201). The voices do not necessarily have to agree, but they have to leave room for other voices to speak: although each voice requires a counterpart or antagonist for it to “be a forceful telling,” the voices are dependent on society making space for them (201). The more voices that blend, the greater the dialogical truth. Thus, the greater the capacity of the story to “tell the truth that there are multiple truths” (41). These multiple truths create “a chorus of languages” in which each individual is an “us” rather than an “I” (201). Through polyphony, individuals live a dialogical life together, which needs to be considered for humanity to have healthy interactions.

Frank also explores stories as powerful forces within society which influence perceptions and identity. Stories are potent once they are told because people remain “caught up” in the stories they hear as they grow, “forget many others, and adapt a few to fit adult perceptions and aspirations” (8). In the Afterword to *The Truth About Stories*, King quotes a Nigerian storyteller, Ben Okri, who said “we live by stories, we also live in them. One way or another we are living the stories planted in us early or along the way, or we are also living the stories we planted - knowingly or unknowingly - in ourselves” (153). King and Fanon explore how stories of the civilized and the savage affect children: Fanon explains that “the Wolf, the Devil, the Wicked, Genie, Evil, and the Savage are always represented by Blacks or Indians, and since one always identifies with the good guys, the little black child, just like the little white child, becomes an explorer, an adventurer, and a missionary” (*Masks* 125). Therefore, the stories that children hear have the effect of turning them against themselves because “the identification process means that the black child [and Indian child] subjectively adopts a white man’s attitude” (*Masks* 126). Reflecting on his childhood, King shares the same sentiments: “When my brother and I were

kids, we would dress up and play cowboys and Indians with the rest of the kids [. . .] Now that I think about it, I don't remember anyone who wanted to be an Indian" (*Inconvenient* 21). Because stories "are resources for people, and conduct people," the stories that children grow up with "act in human consciousness, with individuals sometimes being aware of what story is acting and sometimes not" (Frank 14 original italics). These stories influence the way that children view others as well as themselves. In preferring the cowboy image to the Indian, King and his brother are adopting an attitude in which the Indian is savage and the cowboy is good. Emma LaRocque, in *When the Other is Me*, calls this an "internalization" of colonial attitudes in the colonized other (119). Frank argues that people think about stories as much as they think *with* them (49); thus, stories teach people about who they are and determine who they choose to be.

Stories are powerful, not only because they have the ability to affect a person, but also because they have the ability to affect many. Frank suggests that stories are "out of control" because "once a story has been put into play, it will have effects that neither storyteller nor listeners can control" (35). King demonstrates the power of stories with a humorous basketball example. King is approached by Narcisse Blood and Martin Heavyhead, who talk him into playing for an all Native league (*Stories* 106). King recounts that he was amazing in the first game: other players got out of the way whenever he "lumbered to the basket," and when he shot, no one tried to stop him; he scored six points in the game (107). However, King is soon told that Narcisse lied, saying King had been in a serious car accident and now has a metal plate in his head. Narcisse said that if King got "bumped and the plate slipped," King would "go berserk" (107). Although humorous, King's story demonstrates the power stories have in deciding people's actions and in determining how others are viewed. Because they were told King would go "berserk" if he was bumped, the other players gave him plenty of room on the court, and King

scored many points. However, when the truth is clarified, King becomes a “marked man” and does not score “two points the rest of the season” (108).

The painful, destructive power of stories is contrasted with the basketball story: a story “told one way could cure” but the same story told another way could injure (92). The capacity of stories to kill is seen in the memoir of King’s friend, Louis Owens. A Choctaw-Cherokee-Irish writer, Owens “killed himself in an airport parking garage on his way to an academic conference” (92). King re-tells Owens’s story, which is about the interlinked oppressive forces of capitalism and racism. Government authorities in California closed the borders to South America immigration workers in 1966, giving Owens the “opportunity” to work in an “economic opportunity work program” where anyone with “a sufficiently low income [. . .] could qualify to work in the fields for minimum wage” (20). Owens thought “it sounded like fun” and went (20). He slept on a metal cot “like in those old military and prison movies” (21), was charged “a modest fee for room and board” (22), found the food unbearable, and was locked in the compound at night (24). A mob of citizens from the nearby town, angered by the close proximity of the black and Indian workers, try to burn the camp but are prevented. When Owens and the other workers come out from hiding the next morning, they find they have been deserted by the employers and jailers. The workers are then forced to walk back home, demonstrating the disastrous end that this economic “opportunity” provided. King quotes Owens’s questions about what happened to the others from the camp:

Do they sit in midlife and wonder, as I do, whether it really happened at all? Whether their memories, like mine, are warped and shadowed far beyond reliability. Whether even trying to put such a thing into words is an absurd endeavor, as if such things are

best left to turn and drift in inarticulate memory like those river pebbles that get worn more and more smooth over time until there are no edges. (*Train* 27)

Owens is haunted throughout his memoir by the effect that stories have had on those around him, and by how those stories have, in turn, affected him. He wonders about his own story of the mob that hated the black and aboriginal workers so much that they attempted to burn them alive. King identifies himself with Owens, arguing that they both wrote “knowing that none of the stories we told would change the world. But we wrote in the hope that they would” (92). Owens’s knowledge that the interlocked oppression of capitalism and racism would remain in place gradually became stronger than his hope because of the stories, such as the one about his experience in the camp, that accumulated during his life.

The power and effects of stories are also demonstrated by King’s reference to Leslie Silko’s *Ceremony* (*Stories* 9). In Silko’s *Ceremony*, evil comes into the world because of witch people. They all gather and have a competition “To see who could come up with the scariest thing,” and, through a story, one witch wins: “Unfortunately the story this witch told was an awful thing full of fear and slaughter, disease and blood. A story of murderous mischief” (9). Although the other witches plead with the winner to “Call the story back,” King argues that “once a story is told, it cannot be called back. Once told, it is loose in the world. So you have to be careful with the stories you tell” (10). The witch’s story is actually a symbolic one that foretells the coming of colonization and its horrible effects on indigenous peoples. Yet the story also celebrates the power of indigenous cultures and their capacity to endure. Although the scariest thing is colonization, it is invented by the Trickster character, a central figure in Native narratives. For instance, Gerald Vizenor’s *Braveheart* is, according to Paula Gunn Allen, both “the funniest and most brutal American Indian novel written” due to the invocation of

Trickster(97): she argues that the novel faithfully “removes Indian fiction entirely from its colonizer-influenced frameworks” yet is founded on the “tribal perception of the essential humor of earthly life” (97). This humor is depicted through the Trickster character, who is immortal. This mythic figure is a central part of indigenous mythology and a tribute to its undying all-enveloping strength.

Arthur Frank explains that a person’s narrative identity, which is constantly in flux, is influenced by the story’s power of interpellation. Interpellation acts in two ways: the story “calls to its characters to be particular selves, and it calls on readers or listeners to recognize themselves in particular characters” (49). When many stories interpellate a person, these stories make up the narrative habitus of the individual. Frank defines the narrative habitus:

Narrative habitus is a disposition to hear some stories as those that one ought to listen to, ought to repeat on appropriate occasions, and ought to be guided by. Narrative habitus describes the embodied sense of attraction, indifference, or repulsion people feel in response to stories; the intuitive, usually tacit sense that some story is *for us* or not for us; that it expresses possibilities of which we are or can be a part, or that it represents a world in which we have no stake. (53)

This disposition is also influenced by the people or the “group” to which an individual belongs: “to be a member of a group is to grow up on stories shared within that group” (54). Since stories of a habitus can subtly influence perceptions and interactions, this influence on one’s identity may go unnoticed. The disposition that individuals have to stories, however, is the result of the narrative habitus that individuals have built up: people are “disposed to certain stories just as they are disposed to particular foods,” and certain stories intuitively belong while others do not (52-3). Stories, through interpellation, demand acknowledgment. The stories that call to a person

become part of the narrative habitus because a person must choose how to respond to the story. These stories create a tension both within the story itself and within the hearer: “hitching a ride on the immanent volition of the story and being carried where such a story usually goes,” the hearer tries to “rewrite the story by acting differently from what the old story required” (51). A tragic story such as the life story of Louis Owens may function in this way, calling readers forth to rewrite his narrative of oppression and depression. This tension creates the possibility to act, or to rewrite the story, thus changing the individual in the process. In *The Truth About Stories*, King challenges the ability of the hearers to rewrite the story [change their narrative habitus] in response to his refrain concerning the cluster of stories in each chapter: “It’s yours. Do with it what you will [. . .] But don’t say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story. You’ve heard it now” (29). Therefore, the hearers of his words are responsible, and King forces them to both recognize and accept the responsibility. Although King is aware that his words can easily be ignored, he writes hoping his stories will interpellate people and cause change: King and Owens “wrote knowing that none of the stories we told would change the world. But we wrote in the hopes that they would” (92). King’s *The Truth About Stories* and *The Inconvenient Indian: A Curious Account of Native People in North America* tell stories that call readers forth to change each reader’s personal narrative habitus from one of colonization to one of decolonization.

Frank argues that “Vital, breathing stories can break through the filters and grids” existing in the already formed narrative habitus (59). These stories make themselves heard, whether or not they fit the reader’s narrative habitus, because their message has often been inscribed by long forgotten stories; stories “do not cease to perform when they are not being told” (40). Instead, they remain unconsciously in the reader’s mind. Thus, “what seems like an

epiphany is only the conscious realization of a shift that had been taking place in small increments for some time” (59). Each individual has the ability to change his or her narrative habitus, allowing society to change the stories that provide its moral ground: if “we change the stories we live by, quite possibly we change our lives” (*Stories* 153).

In “Centering Words: Writing a Sense of Place,” Kimberly Blaeser suggests that “Indian people don't really instruct their children, they story them - that is, not only tell them stories, but encourage them to hear and see the stories of the world around them” (101). King, in *The Truth About Stories*, instructs listeners in the same tradition, though story. These stories admonish listeners “to remember the stories, and encourage them to create or discover their own stories,” which is a trait of Native American storytelling (101). As King suggests in “Godzilla vs. Post-Colonial,” when patterns, metaphors, structures, themes, and characters are taken from oral literature and placed in written literature, an oral voice is created that “defeats the readers’ efforts to read the stories silently to themselves,” thereby encouraging readers to “read the stories out loud” (186). In adhering to this oral tradition, *The Truth About Stories* contains clusters of stories reminiscent of the cyclical narrative frame used traditionally by Native American storytellers.

This cyclical frame, as noted in Paula Gunn Allen’s *The Sacred Hoop*, “requires all ‘points’ that make up the sphere of being to have a significant identity and function” (59). King argues, in “Godzilla Versus Postcolonial,” that these stories contain “flat narrative line[s] that ignore the ubiquitous climaxes and resolutions that are so valued in non-Native literature” (187). All the points of King’s narrative are equally significant: he does not build to a climax. Instead, his stories build upon one another and often reference each other but are all equal. For instance, in King’s cluster containing the basketball story and Owens’s story, neither story is more important than the other, as both advocate the power of stories. However, one story is not told

immediately after the other. Instead, they are separated to create unity within the cluster.

Indigenous story, according to Allen, is equalitarian in structure and audience: “the structure of American Indian literature [. . .] does not rely on conflict, crisis, and resolution for organization, nor does its merit depend on the parentage, education, or connections of the author” (59).

Instead, the significance of a story, and the significance of each element of the story, “is determined by its relation to creative empowerment, its reflection of tribal understandings, and its relation to the unitary nature of reality” (59). The significance of *The Truth About Stories*, then, cannot be equated with a certain climactic story in a cluster. Rather, the clusters of stories, and the work as a whole, must be considered. The cyclical structure is apparent in the cluster of stories told in each lecture and also in the circularity of the overall lecture series. Each lecture begins with the same ritualistic opening:

There is a story I know. It’s about the earth and how it floats in space on the back of a turtle. I’ve heard this story many times, and each time someone tells the story, it changes. Sometimes the change is simply in the voice of the storyteller. Sometimes the change is in the details. Sometimes in the order of events. Other times it’s the dialogue or the response of the audience. But in all the tellings of all the tellers, the world never leaves the turtle’s back. And the turtle never swims away. (1, 31, 61, 91, 121)

This ritualistic beginning links each story to the following and preceding one. The circularity is also a result of the ritualistic endings, which vary by a few words and close each of the series of stories: “It’s yours. Do with it what you will [. . .] But don’t say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story. You’ve heard it now” (29,



60, 89, 119, 151). Through repetition, the stories interweave and link together, making each story equally important in the series and necessary to the whole.

Paula Gunn Allen argues that the contrasting frameworks of Native narratives and caucasian narratives contribute to her conclusion that “the Indian universe moves and breathes continuously, and the Western universe is fixed and static” (59). No point in Native traditional stories is more important than another. This circular frame also represents the belief in equality among living organisms. Native American traditions view “all creatures as relatives (and in tribal systems relationship is central), as offspring of the Great Mystery, as cocreators, as children of our mother, and as necessary parts of an ordered, balanced, and living whole” (59). On the other hand, Western belief creates a “great hierarchical ladder of being” on which “ground and trees occupy a very low rung, animals a slightly higher one, and man (never woman) - especially ‘civilized’ man - a very high one” (Allen 59).

These contrasting views of hierarchy versus equality are expressed by the opposing creation stories which, in *The Truth About Stories*, are used to recount “how the world was formed, how things came to be” (10). King argues that “contained within creation stories are relationships that help to define the nature of the universe and how cultures understand the world in which they exist” (10). Charm is the name King gives to the woman in the Native creation story who, while digging for Red Fern Foot, “dug right through to the other side of the world” (13). She falls through the hole and lands in “the earth when it was young” (14). Earth is composed of nothing but water, and so the birds save Charm from her fall and place her on the back of a turtle. However, Charm is pregnant, and there is not enough room on the turtle for a child. She suggests creating land, but she requires mud. All the animals attempt to reach the bottom of the lake to get Charm mud but are unable to dive far enough. When otter finally

succeeds, Charm, through singing and dancing, makes land: “very slowly the lump of mud began to grow. It grew and grew and grew into a world, part water, part mud” (18). Charm gives birth to twins, who create valleys and mountains, rivers, trees, and fruit (19-20). One twin creates nice things, while the other complicates matters: “the right-handed Twin created roses. The left-handed Twin put thorns on the stems. The right-handed Twin created summer. The left-handed Twin created winter. The right-handed Twin created sunshine. The left-handed Twin created shadow” (20). It is the animals who suggest that the twins should make human beings, but they become worried: “They [the humans] don’t look too bright [ . . . ] We hope they won’t be a problem” (20). However, the twins comfort the animals, insisting that the humans and animals “are going to get along just fine” (20). King’s use of animal figures as sacred links his tale to traditional Native storytelling in which animals are “frequently linked to realms of the sacred” (Blaser 94). Furthermore, in King’s creation story, as well as throughout his writing, landscape is tied to the supernatural [or spiritual], a belief that is central to Native people: “The natural and what is often called the supernatural are understood as being woven together in the essence of place, both realms a natural part of our experience. And this weaving is explored in story” (Blaser 101). The world Native tradition portrays, in which the animals and humans are both part of creation rather than controlled by the governing humans, opposes the Biblical account.

In the Christian creation story, “God creates night and day, the sun and the moon, all the creatures of the world, and finally [ . . . ] he creates humans. Man first and then woman” (*Stories* 21). In this world, there is only one rule, which is broken, resulting in the end of Eden. God then closes Eden to Adam and Eve, “places an angel with a fiery sword at the entrance and tosses Adam and Eve into a howling wilderness to fend for themselves, a wilderness in which sickness and death, hate and hunger are their constant companions” (*Stories* 21). King acknowledges that

he spent more time on the Native story but defends himself: while many people are familiar with Genesis, few “have ever met Charm” (22). The telling of the two stories differs in execution as well as content. The Native story’s “oral storytelling voice,” crafted “in terms of a performance for a general audience,” contrasts with the Christian story’s classical execution: King says he “tried to maintain a sense of rhetorical distance and decorum while organizing the story” (22). Although his tellings “colour the stories and suggest values that may be neither inherent nor warranted” (22), King’s tellings are generally true to the traditions of indigenous and caucasian societies. The Native story is light and humorous, promotes togetherness, and discourages “people from perceiving the deity as a sort of cosmic bellhop who alone is responsible for their personal well-being” (Allen 67), while the Christian story is heavy and authoritative. King sardonically suggests that “none of you would make the mistake of confusing storytelling strategies with the value or sophistication of a story” (23). He summarizes how the characters in the Christian creation story portray a hierarchical world in contrast to the cooperation Charm presents:

So here are our choices: a world in which creation is a solitary, individual act or a world in which creation is a shared activity; a world that begins in harmony and slides towards chaos or a world that begins in chaos and moves toward harmony; a world marked by competition or a world determined by co-operation. (24-5)

Paula Gunn Allen supports the distinction that King draws between the two creation stories: in Western society, “the supernatural is discussed as though it were apart from people, and the natural as though people were apart from it. This necessarily forces English-speaking people into a position of alienation from the world they live in” (Allen 60). In the Christian creation story, for instance, man and woman are created from the earth [man first, then woman], but they name

their surroundings, thus emphasizing their dominance and alienating themselves from the animals and nature. This isolation is “entirely foreign to American Indian thought,” in which “every story, every song, every ceremony tells the Indian that each creature is a part of a living whole and that all parts of that whole are related to one another by virtue of their participation in the whole of being” (60). This whole of being is evident in Charm’s story where the animals work in harmony with Charm to find mud, and later through her children when they shape the land. The animals are already named and are equal to the humans, exemplified through the twins’ promise that they will all get along. This whole of being is also reinforced by King’s narrative circularity. His use of repetition is also vital, for, according to Allen, it “integrates or fuses, allowing thought and word to coalesce into one rhythmic whole” (63). King’s writing, therefore, exemplifies Native storytelling traditions both in content, style, and form. In doing so, it also presents an alternative worldview.

The alternate worldview that King’s creation story offers is mirrored by the alternate view of First Nations people that King is striving for. Rather than categorizing them as Other, King supports a breathing and changing depiction involving interaction and tolerance. Through changing the narrative habitus and removing ascribed images of the Indian, King is freeing First Nations people. The goal of King’s re-storying is to create the very same “new man” that Franz Fanon argues for in his conclusion to *The Wretched of the Earth*. Fanon argues for a new history of man that takes into account the crimes “committed at the very heart of man, the pathological dismembering of his functions and the erosion of his unity” (238). This new man will learn from “the fracture, the stratification and the bloody tensions fed by class, and, on the immense scale of humanity, [from] the racial hatred, slavery, exploitation and, above all, the bloodless genocid[s]” that have occurred (238). A healthy interaction between humans, in which humanity can “walk in

the company of man, every man, night and day, for all times” (238) can only occur when the human replaces the monetary as the prime social value; when racial and gender divisions have been removed.

## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> The Subaltern is defined as “A person or (occas.) thing of inferior rank or status; a subordinate. Now chiefly in critical and cultural theory, esp. post-colonial theory: a member of a marginalized or oppressed group; a person who is not part of the hegemony” (“subaltern, n.”. OED Online. March 2013. Oxford University Press. 10 March 2013).

<sup>ii</sup> King also examines Richard Throssel’s mission to photograph the Indian. However, Throssel, a Cree photographer, did not depict the Indian as dying or noble. Instead, Throssel portrayed the Indian as contemporary. His photographs included a traditionally dressed Native family sitting at a modern table having tea (*Stories* 42-43).

<sup>iii</sup> Metanarrative refers to “Any narrative which is concerned with the idea of storytelling, spec. one which alludes to other narratives, or refers to itself and to its own artifice. Also: a piece of narrative, esp. a classic text or other archetypal story, which provides a schematic world view upon which an individual's experiences and perceptions may be ordered” (“metanarrative, n.”. OED Online. March 2013. Oxford University Press. 14 March 2013).

<sup>iv</sup> Hierarchies of gender are also criticized in *The Truth About Stories*, as King, like Spivak, notices that women are oppressed. Spivak argued that the subaltern female is the lowest of the low, living in the shadows of everyone else. King watches his mother experience the same difficulty. Although King’s mother makes her way from “doing hair in a converted garage to designing tools for the aerospace industry,” she is constantly reminded that it is a man’s world because “each step she took had to be made as quietly as possible, each movement camouflaged [. . .] For over thirty years, she held to the shadows, stayed in the shade” (*Stories* 3). When she is offered a promotion to become a “fully fledged, salaried engineer,” King’s mother accepts, only to discover that because she is a woman, “she made considerably less than the other members of the team,” “had to punch a time clock,” and “wasn’t even eligible for benefits or a pension” (4). Similarly, King experiences sexism while working at a bank. King is labelled a “junior executive,” a title given to male tellers, “as opposed to the women who worked as tellers and were just called tellers” (46). Both King’s mother’s experience and King’s title at the bank are significant because they suggest “innate promises that men had possibilities of advancement, while women did not” (46).