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Changing Women: Thomas King’s Depiction of Indigenous Female Characters in *Green Grass, Running Water*

1. Introduction and Focal Points of this Thesis

Thomas King has become more and more famous for his writings during the last two decades. His works have been included in nearly every anthology dealing with (Native) Canadian Literature.1 Though born in the United States, in California, and of Cherokee, Greek, and German descent the author regards himself as a

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Canadian.² He “grew up in a female-dominated household”³ because his father
left his mother and their two sons when King was still a child. This might explain
why strong female characters often feature in King’s writings. King engaged in an
academic career and started writing novels as well as short fiction. Green Grass,
Running Water is Thomas King’s second novel, which was published in 1993. It
was nominated for the Governor General’s Award,⁴ one of Canada’s most impor-
tant prizes.

A major topic of King’s writing is the depiction of Native American life.⁵ The
quest for identity as a member of an ethnic minority in a postcolonial society,
having to fight against prejudices and social stigma is a struggle that is central in
Green Grass, Running Water.⁶ In this context he often concentrates on borders “be-
tween Native and white people, between men and women, between urban Natives
and Natives living on reserves”.⁷ These borders have to be negotiated and are not
fixed in King’s work. His novels and short fiction provide some striking examples
of these different types of borders that play an important part in the creation of
identity. The novel “aims to reclaim images of Native people from stereotyping by
the dominant culture.”⁸

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² It is interesting to note that the Dictionary of Literary Biography includes him in two different cate-
gories: He is mentioned in the volume on North American Writers of the United States, (James Rup-
pert, “Thomas King”, in: Kenneth M. Roemer (ed.), Native American Writers of the United States,
Dictionary of Literary Biography, vol. 175 (Detroit & others, 1997), pp. 143-147.) but then again
in the 2007 version of Twenty-First-Century Canadian Writing (Jennifer Andrews, “Thomas King”,
in: Christian Riegel (ed.), Twenty-First-Century Canadian Writers, Dictionary of Literary Biography,
³ Arnold E. Davidson / Priscilla L. Walton / Jennifer Andrews, Border Crossings. Thomas King’s
Cultural Inversions (Toronto & others, 2003), p. 4.
⁴ Cf. Smaro Kamboureli (ed.), Making a Difference. Canadian Multicultural Literature (Toronto, 1996),
p. 233.
⁵ Blanca Schorcht says that Green Grass, Running Water shows “the world of contemporary Native
reality.” Blanca Schorcht, Storied Voices in Native American Texts. Harry Robinson, Thomas King,
⁶ This quest for identity for members of First Nation minorities is a central topic throughout
King’s writings. For example he devotes a chapter in The Truth about Stories to the discussion of
stereotypes: “You’re not the Indian I had in mind.” There he discusses the picture drawn by au-
thors and artists on Indian culture and personalities in the past and describes his own ap-
proaches to the topic. See: Thomas King, The Truth About Stories. A Native Narrative (Toronto,
2003), pp. 31-60.
⁷ Kamboureli, Making a Difference Canadian Multicultural Literature, p. 233.
⁸ Mark Shackleton, “Monique Mojica’s ‘Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots’ and Thomas
King’s ‘Green Grass, Running Water’. Countering Misrepresentations of ‘Indianness’ in Recent
Native North American Writing”, in: Peter H. Marsden / Geoffrey V. Davis, Towards a Transcul-
tural Future. Literature and Human Rights in a ‘Post-Colonial World’, ANSEL Papers 8 (Amsterdam &
The question of identity is “an important question in my fiction,” Thomas King states in an interview with Jeffrey Canton. Therefore, since identity is also a major topic where the female characters are concerned, some more general aspects of identity need to be considered. Identity is generated from different sources. It is usually not national but regional and is based on common history, or histories. History, in this case, is more a concept of communal ideas about the past and can involve legends. Therefore the term ‘histories’ can be used to indicate that one of the multiple constructs of history is meant. “Another pattern by which identity borders are negotiated may be seen in the availability of public images for group display.” Hence the process of ‘being named’ by others and ‘being defined’ by an outside perspective, following Edward Said’s line of thought, also creates identity – be it in a positive sense or in a negative way. This could lead to statements such as “They say we are the bravest so we must be,” or “They say we are stupid but we always prove them wrong.” Stuart Hall says that the creation of identity is a process that is also influenced by the outside world. Furthermore, this view from the outside becomes internalised. For a long time the Eurocentric reader was only given “three visions of the Indians […] the dissipated savage, the barbarous savage, and the heroic savage.” These images, also conveyed by movies, have to be fought – in real life as well as in King’s novel. Stereotypes help us to understand the world in rough categories of good-and-bad, black-and-white, Indian-and-settler. For a deeper understanding, stereotypes have to be re-worked. There is neither “the Indian” nor “the European settler”. “‘Indian’ becomes, in part, a construct,” emphasises King. Therefore it can be assumed that the “novel plays with oppositions and stereotypes, revealing essentialized identity as a social construction even – or especially – when the oppositions are used as tests of some inherent Native authenticity.”

Bearing all of this in mind, it has to be stressed that for “Native people, identity comes from community.” Though, of course, over-generalising statements like this have to be handled with care, it seems to be true that for Native peoples

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15 Schorecht, Shorted Voices in Native American Texts, p. 27.
their tribe is an important source of identity. Relations are vital.\textsuperscript{17} The position within a specific group has also to be considered.\textsuperscript{18}

Nevertheless communal identity is still just one aspect of the complex picture that makes an individual. Experiences shape a person just as well. For Native Americans the experience of being torn between a world dominated by western discourse on the one hand, and more traditional tribal values on the other hand is distinct.\textsuperscript{19}

In (post-)colonial societies Homi K. Bhabha’s concept of ‘mimicry’ can often be found and becomes a part of identity.\textsuperscript{20} It means that the colonised mimics the actions and imitates the values of the oppressing power. The men in \textit{Green Grass, Running Water} often seem to want to be white. These “mimic men” are opposed by the women who “not only refuse to assimilate but also subvert settler culture.”\textsuperscript{21} Applying Bhabha’s terminology this would be a case of hybridity. Aspects of colonial power and Native structures are combined and create something new.\textsuperscript{22} Dee Horne states that “King demonstrates that he ‘knows the difference’ between creative hybridity and colonial mimicry.”\textsuperscript{23}

It is, however, important to remember that Native terms of identity differ from Eurocentric standards. Such concepts of gender, race and nation are not part of Native philosophy. In King’s novel they are therefore “repeatedly deconstructed through a trickster discourse that takes aim at the hierarchical constructions of gender, race and nation.”\textsuperscript{24}

But the question what \textit{Green Grass, Running Water} is really about is more complex than simply concentrating on the border issue and identity struggles. It depends to a great extent on the reader and his or her focus. Some scholars have paid close attention to the trickster character, the literary references, the structural

\textsuperscript{17} In his anthology \textit{All My Relations} King ponders on the question who can be considered Canadian and who can be considered Native. It seems as if you can choose to a certain extent who you want to be as long as you have personal ties to one culture or the other. Cf. Thomas King, “Introduction”, in: Thomas King (ed.), \textit{All My Relations. An Anthology of Contemporary Canadian Native Fiction} (Toronto, 1990), pp. x-xi.


\textsuperscript{20} The problems of using postcolonial concepts when analysing \textit{Green Grass, Running Water} will be discussed in Chapter 1.1.


\textsuperscript{22} For the importance of the concept of hybridity in King’s novel cf. Clare Archer-Lean, \textit{Cross-Cultural Analysis of the Writings of Thomas King and Colin Johnson (Mudrooroo)} (New York & others, 2006), p. 312.

\textsuperscript{23} Horne, \textit{Contemporary American Indian Writing}, p. 48. She goes on saying that King “subversively mimics aspects of the colonial discourse and its civilizing mission to re-present it in a hybrid American Indian context.” ibid., p. 26.

\textsuperscript{24} Davidson, \textit{Border Crossings. Thomas King’s Cultural Inversions}, p. 156.
elements and the connection to the native tradition of oral story telling, or the use of humour as a literary device.

This thesis focuses on the depiction of the female characters, the “[s]trong, sassy women”\(^ {25} \) already advertised on the cover of the novel. Of course, it covers only a small fraction of what can be seen in the novel. Nevertheless, a closer examination of this topic is important because despite a vast variety of material available for analysis, the Native women are often neglected in favour of the mythical women or the men.

There are few studies dealing with the analysis of female characters in Native literature. There are, of course, chapters headed “Decolonisation in the Feminine”\(^ {26} \) and monographs like Helen Hoy’s *How Shall I Read These?*\(^ {27} \) and Patrice E. M. Hollrah’s *The Old Lady Trill, the Victory Yell. The Power of Women in Native American Literature,*\(^ {28} \) but they usually only cover female authors and their works. The topic of women in *Green Grass, Running Water* is generally simply discussed peripherally in secondary literature. Very few authors have looked closely at the female characters, and if they do, then they often focus on the mythical women. There are only few exceptions. In their book *Border Crossings* Arnold E. Davidson, Priscilla L. Walton and Jennifer Andrews devote a whole chapter to “The Comic Dimensions of Gender, Race, and Nation”. The only academic work that completely focuses on King’s Native women is Christina McKay’s Master’s thesis *And that one takes a big bite of one of those nice red apples: Portraits of Native Women in Thomas King’s ‘Green Grass, Running Water’ and Medicine River*.

In his “Introduction” to *Ethnopoetics of the minority voice* Jannetta considers that there are “two modes of escape from the colonial relationship for the colonised: assimilation on the one hand, and resistance or revolt on the other.”\(^ {29} \) Thomas King’s female characters take the third option: They bend the rules imposed on them until they fit their purpose. All three Blackfoot women, Norma, Alberta and Latisha, can hence be seen as Changing Women. They are able to adapt to the circumstances they live in and try to make the best of every situation. They also succeed in helping others to change: first and foremost this is Norma’s aim when she helps her nephew, but it is also an element of Latisha’s friendship to Alberta. All characters gain depth by interacting with one another. “Through the text, the women are validated to be transmitters of culture and they have an ability to trans-


\(^ {27} \) Helen Hoy, *How should I read these?: Native Women Writers in Canada* (Toronto, 2001).


form others.”

Thirdly the term ‘Changing Women’ relates to the mythical oral story tradition. The stories of Latisha, Alberta and Norma can be seen as part of an ever-repeating story cycle of Native women. The structure of the novel shows through its constantly changing perspective that there is not one but many stories told simultaneously and interwoven. Therefore this thesis contradicts Clare Archer-Lean’s statement that “Despite all of this positivity [...] King’s women [...] remain fixed.” In her book Cross-Cultural Analysis of the Writings of Thomas King and Colin Johnson (Mudrooroo) she recycles among others her sub-chapter “Positioning of women” from her Master’s thesis. She argues furthermore that the female characters display “repeating similar forms of anti-male freedom [...] rather than their own multiple and varied female experience.” She also denies that the women have to deal with “female angst” (“At no point is there a sense of female angst.”).

Strongly disagreeing with these statements this thesis seeks to prove that “[t]hese Aboriginal women are presented as agents of their own lives: they are strong women who nevertheless have their share of problems.”

In contrast to the men in Green Grass, Running Water the women seem to know who they are. “The women in King’s novel [...] work to overthrow stereotypes about Indians and assert their identities from a Native point of view.” They seem to manage to develop their identities much more skilfully than their male counterparts. “King’s Blackfoot woman displays heroic und unwavering exemplary strength of identity.” The whole book is not linear but has a circular structure and thus can be seen as a female version of story in contrast to the western

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32 Ibid., p.194.
33 Ibid., p. 194.
37 For example opening and ending of the novel.
white male linear structure of a narrative. Secondary literature basically agrees that King’s women find their way to cope with the world they live in. In an interview King explained why his female characters are so “strong and independent”:

It’s not so much that the women are smarter than the men […] My sense is that within society as a whole, men are simply more privileged and with that privilege comes a certain laziness.

The women in my books don’t take things for granted. They work pretty hard to get what they want and have to make specific decisions to make their lives come together.

By refusing to allow themselves “to be marginalized”, as McKay puts it, the women gain strength and this strength helps them in future to cope with difficult new situations. The world is not all bad for them but a challenge. Two of the tactics for meeting this challenge and keeping up the motivation to fight on are “humour and irony.” Both are frequently present in the comments of all three women and will be taken into account during the analysis of the novel.

But first of all, the next two sub-chapters will provide some more background information to provide a deeper understanding of the female characters. First, there will be a brief discussion of Canadian postcolonialism and the difficulties emerging from these theories in connection with Green Grass, Running Water. Secondly, there will be a short introduction to Blackfoot women in general. The main body of this thesis focuses on the analysis of the Blackfoot women in the novel. First Norma, the oldest of the three, will be examined. Her attitude towards tradition as a source of her identity and actions is central and will be dealt with in detail. The next chapter will deal with Latisha, Norma’s niece. An important part of her life are her former husband and her children. They will be analysed first, also to set the background for Latisha’s way of creating her own identity. Then her work and the closely connected way of dealing with tradition will be focused on.

Chapter 4 is devoted to Alberta, who lives and works farthest away from the reserve and seems to be the youngest because she is still searching for the proper way to finally become who she wants to be. After a brief characterisation, her working life will then be examined because this is the part of her identity which she has already created to her own satisfaction. Then the topic of relationships and, more important, the issue of children will be looked at in greater detail. Lastly, her attitude to tradition and her function within the story will be discussed.

The last chapter is devoted to other female characters in the novel. Of course, the mythical women deserve to be mentioned because they do not only play an

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38 Archer-Lean, Cross-Cultural Analysis of the Writings of Thomas King and Colin Johnson (Mudwooro), p. 34.
40 McKay, ‘And that one takes a big bite of one of those nice red apples’, p. 46.
41 Davidson, Border Crossings. Thomas King’s Cultural Inversions, p. 163.
important part in the development of the plot and contribute to the reader’s confusion and understanding at the same time but also add a religious dimension to the female characters. It is also important to note that King does not idealise his Native characters but depicts “human weaknesses, which he finds in Natives as well as in Whites.”42 He also rejects the “simplistic binary antagonism, which ultimately leaves Aboriginal peoples no choice because both options are forms of (self-) annihilation.”43 The characters are “neither demonized nor idealized.”44 For this reason and to emphasise some aspects of the depiction of women, female problems and the quest for identity, a last sub-chapter will deal with Babo Jones, the Afro-American janitor, and Karen, Norma’s sister-in-law, a white Canadian woman who is fascinated by Indian traditions.

Finally this thesis wants to show that the indigenous women depicted in King’s novel are neither stereotypical nor shallow and present a picture of people who consciously change their identities in a creative way. The women are the ones handing down and adapting traditions and building their own world and are effective as Changing Women.

1.1 Postcolonialism in Canada and in Thomas King’s Writing

There are always problems when using the term ‘postcolonial’. In Canada there is a huge debate on whether it can be classified as a postcolonial nation.

In one of her essays Laura Moss asks the vital question “Is Canada Postcolonial?”45 She states that Canada cannot be put in the same category as Third World Nations though they might share the experience of being in the Commonwealth. The answer to her question is complex and she starts each explanation with “‘it depends’”.46 In the end, “it all depends” on the focus chosen. Canada is a rich nation, a former colony, still suppresses First Nation people in some areas of social and political life and believes in multiculturalism.47

In recent publications there is the discussion to reconsider “the nature of the doubly colonized.”48 The double colonisation originates from the thought that Canada used to be a British colony. Therefore the subjects living in Canada were

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44  Ibid., p. 114.
46  Ibid., p. 7.
under British colonial rule. The First Nation peoples were then again suppressed and in a way colonised by the colonised. Diana Brydon is of the opinion that the term postcolonial can only be applied to Third World Nations but not to the so-called Fourth World of the Indigenous population. Brydon further thinks that Canada is post-modern but questions the definition of the country as postcolonial.\(^49\) Because of all the difficulties involving the use of the term ‘postcolonial’ she thinks it is more appropriate to talk of postcolonial theories in the plural.\(^50\)

Brydon’s argument also includes criticism of the way post-colonial theorists deal with Native culture. She sees that “some native writers in Canada resist what they see as a violating appropriation to insist on their ownership of their stories and their exclusive claim to an authenticity that should not be ventriloquised or parodied.”\(^51\)

This problem is also approached by Thomas King himself, though he stresses that he does not consider himself a theorist. King does not like the term postcolonialism for a variety of reasons. In his essay “Godzilla vs. Postcolonial” he argues that the only benefit this category implies for him is that it sets him and his writing apart from the masses. But otherwise the term itself bears more dangers than advantages. Like the proverbial Trojan horse it secretly carries unpleasant implications. King states that “[a]ssumptions are a dangerous thing.”\(^52\) The term postcolonial assumes various aspects. It strongly implies a sense of linear progression. There has to be pre-colonial and colonial literature to have post-colonial literature. This, of course, is no appropriate classification for Native literature because it would be defined only by its reaction to western power. It also implies that the experience of colonisation is one, if not the important influence in the writings classified as postcolonial.

The other assumption is that postcolonial literature must be written by Natives, another term that is even harder to define. The decision whether writers have to be native by birth, or by legal status, or even by choice is difficult if not impossible to make. King is therefore “quite unwilling to use these terms.”\(^53\)

Instead he introduces the terms: “tribal, interfusional, polemical, and associational”\(^54\) when talking about Native literature. Literature is tribal when it “exists primarily within a tribe or a community […] and retained in a Native language”; it


\(^{54}\) Ibid., p. 243.
is polemic when it is written “either in a Native language or in English, French, etc. [and] that concerns itself with the clash of Native and non-Native cultures”. King, “Godzilla vs. Post-Colonial”, p. 244.

Interfusional literature is marked by the combination of oral and written literature. Lastly associational literature can be used for literature set in a Native communal setting but does not focus on the clash of cultures. Kristine Smith uses King’s terms “polemical” as well as “associational” for classification. Though there is high tension between those two rather contradictory terms, one can argue that this is an inbuilt tension of the novel which cannot be solved by classification and very much depends on the reader’s preferences. Horne additionally argues that Green Grass, Running Water can be read as “interfusional” due to the structural mix of western written and Native oral tradition as far as storytelling is concerned.

It is therefore true to say that novels “like Green Grass, Running Water [...] resist being read as post-colonial literature.” Kristine Smith uses King’s terms “polemical” as well as “associational” for classification. Though there is high tension between those two rather contradictory terms, one can argue that this is an inbuilt tension of the novel which cannot be solved by classification and very much depends on the reader’s preferences. Horne additionally argues that Green Grass, Running Water can be read as “interfusional” due to the structural mix of western written and Native oral tradition as far as storytelling is concerned.

Though it is clear that Green Grass, Running Water is more than a mere post-colonial novel, it is difficult not to apply postcolonial categories of interpretation when analysing the text. Again one is caught within a specific discourse one cannot escape. At this point in time there seems to emerge the need for a new theoretical framework. Due to the complexity of this problem and the limited scope of this thesis it is not possible to develop such a theory en passant. Nevertheless one has to bear in mind that the discourse creates borders and provides only a limited variety of tools to use on literary texts. We should start thinking outside the ‘new box’ again, not beyond Eurocentrism but even beyond postcolonialism. There are definitely many aspects that a conventional postcolonial analysis simply misses because it is not meant to detect them and one only sees what one already knows. And there are also some traces of new concepts that can be felt but have not been put explicitly into scientific jargon because the vocabulary is limited within the discourse. It is therefore important to question statements like “King’s major concern in Green Grass, Running Water is with the ways and means of resis-
tance to the mechanisms of colonial power.”62 and examine them critically. It is much safer to put it like Kröller: “One of King’s abiding themes is the resilience of Native cultures, their ability to survive by transforming and adapting as circumstances change.”63

Although this thesis relies mainly on conventional postcolonial methods the reader should be aware of the fact that it is part of a limited discourse.

1.2 Blackfoot Women

There is a considerable discussion as to which terminology to use when writing about Natives, Indians, Aboriginal or Indigenous People. Usually it is considered best to use the name of the specific tribe to avoid over-generalization. As Thomas King often uses the term “Indian” this will be used as well as the terms “Native” and the tribal specification “Blackfoot” in this thesis.

To gain a better understanding of the Blackfoot women depicted in King’s novel it is useful to have some information about the tribe and the role women play in tribal society. Naturally, this is not a complete history or a present report on Blackfoot life. Thomas King himself admits that he “hate[s] doing research”64 and compiled most of his knowledge when living with a Blackfoot tribe for ten years.65

Very few scholars have dealt with the Blackfoot tribes in detail. It can all be traced back to only a few ethnological studies. The Blackfoot live on both sides of the US/Canadian border: in Montana and Alberta respectively. Claudia Sadowski-Smith discusses this aspect and talks of “border tribes”66. The so-called Blackfoot confederacy (Siksika) consists of the “Blackfoot proper, the Blood and the Piegan.”67 The language of the Blackfoot belongs to the Algonkian language family.68 Interestingly these languages “do not distinguish male and female through lexical gender.”69 Therefore the gender question is generally not as strong an issue as in western cultures.

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65 Cf. ibid., p. 92.
There was, however, a division of labour according to gender in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. "Men were the hunters and defenders, women the collectors and manual laborers."70 Blackfoot women held economic power. They did not only collect but also process food and produce objects of daily use. Hence they often owned their products, like tepees.71

Hollrah focuses on the importance of tribal structures for the creation of female identity and the concept of gender complementarity, which means that men and women have their specific tasks and these tasks are seen as equally important. However, there is room for negotiating these tasks and women within the tribal community could work in areas usually more associated with men. Especially widows or women living on their own by choice were not limited to the typical female role. "Additionally, because people could act with autonomy, making decisions about their own conduct, women could choose to engage in male-gendered behaviors, for example as warrior women, and not seem atypical."72 The most important quality in a Blackfoot person, according to Kehoe, is autonomy.73

The ninauposkitzipxpe, the so-called manly-hearted women, are a special group within Blackfoot society. Usually they were elderly women but there were also always some younger ones. Kehoe says about them as "[s]uch women owned property, were good managers and usually effective workers, were forthright and assertive in public, in their homes, and as sexual partners, and were active in religious rituals."74 They are also described as bold, independent, ambitious and aggressive. Though they did not fit into society’s rules for ‘gender specific’ behaviour, in the least, they were highly accepted and admired. “The image of the manly-hearted women persisted”75 and is still present in Blackfoot communities today.

With regard to spiritual aspects, women also had a special position in the tribe. Women’s mythical and spiritual importance can best be seen at the Sun Dance, which largely depends on the ceremonial actions, on female participation and the role of Holy Woman.76 The Sun Dance is the most important Blackfoot/Plain Indian religious ceremony. Its date used to depend on nature but at some point in the 20th century the Blackfoot moved it to 4th of July. There was a return to Native traditions especially in the 1970s, which also led to a revival of rituals and ceremo-
nies like the Sun Dance. Especially within Blackfoot communities the ceremonial leaders at the Sun Dance were women.

There are also some – not tribal specific – aspects of Native life that seem important in connection with the following analysis of the novel.

On the one hand there is the role family and family bonds play in Native culture. Spencer Rearden, an Inuit, states that he thinks “that ‘family’ defines much of what Native means. Native people are what they are because of their families and what their families teach them.” Especially women are seen “as giver, as teacher and transmitter of culture, and as community voice and tribal leader.” Additionally ancestors, a sense of history and the connection to the communal land are values in Native cultures. Relating back to the earlier discussion of identity it can be said that “cultural identity is at the centre of who an individual is.”

The concept of gender also needs further explanation in the Native context. “In western tradition, gender, like culture, is thought to be fixed, predetermined, and separate [...] constantly overlapping.” This is why European gender categories should not be applied thoughtlessly, according to McKay. That is one of the reasons why King should not be seen as a ‘Native feminist’ writer, because Natives usually do not use culture and gender for the definition of a person, but relations. Hence feminist theories should be seen critically when used in context with Native women (in writing).

Relating to comments on Green Grass, Running Water this means that one cannot talk of a “feminist turn evident throughout the novel” for similar reasons as discussed in the previous chapter. The reason for the need of strong female characters should not only be traced back to the chances women take out of the double subalternity of being suppressed by a former colonial power and being female,

80 Hoy, How should I read these?, p. 23.
82 McKay, ‘And that one takes a big bite of one of those nice red apples’, p.8.
83 Cf. ibid., p. 39.
84 Cf. ibid., p. 11.
85 Therefore Horne’s statement “That none of the mimics is a woman suggests that feminism is a force with which to resist colonial mimicry.” (Horne, Contemporary American Indian Writing, p. 46) has to be commented on. Of course, the women have their specific ways of dealing with colonial past and a male-dominated present, but again the word “feminism” comes from a western discourse and is not appropriate in this context.
86 As Petzold does in “Thomas King’s ‘Green Grass, Running Water’: A Postmodern Postcolonial Puzzle; or, Coyote Conquers the Campus”, p. 248.
but should include Hollrah’s concept of complementarity. From the storyteller’s point of view it appears only natural that the rather weak and indecisive male characters need strong female counterparts. Their Blackfoot inheritance should also be taken into account. “King’s female characters are granted a level of ‘authenticity’ and subversive power which the men must earn. This subversive power stems from the innate spiritual power of Blackfoot women.”

2. Norma: Guardian and Guide

2.1 Characterisation

Norma is the oldest of the three Blackfoot women. The reader meets her at the beginning story as the first non-mythical character and she is featured throughout the whole novel until the very last scene at the reserve. She is the only one of the three female protagonists living directly on the reserve.

She is a strong woman, a fighter type. She believes in tradition and wants to hold the family together. She does not only feel responsible for her close family but for the Native community living in Blossom as well.

She is approximately in her late sixties since her younger brother, Eli, has already retired from work and their younger sister Camelot has two children, Latisha and Lionel (and latter turns forty during the course of the novel). As far as it is revealed to the reader she is not married (and apparently never was) and does not have any children of her own. It is hard to make one’s mind up about this last point. On the one hand, no one ever mentions that she has children, but on the other hand she gives Alberta advice concerning pregnancy. She either just knows a lot about it or has indeed been with child. It remains Norma’s secret. Nevertheless, she seems to like children, as it can be seen close to the end of the novel when she enquires about Latisha’s children and calls Elizabeth her “granddaughter” and “rocked her” gently on her lap (411).

In the whole novel, names are significant. Norma’s name comes from the Latin ‘norm’ and means rule or standard. She obviously feels in a position to set standards for herself and others – especially for her nephew Lionel, as will be discussed later. She seems to think that everybody is entitled to share her opinion. It worthwhile noticing that her first name, like the other women’s, does not sound specifically Blackfoot or Indian in the least. The name ‘Norma’ is considered English or Italian and is traced back to Bellini’s opera with the same title. There is,

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87 McKay, ‘And that one takes a big bite of one of those nice red apples’, p. 41.
88 In the following text all quotes from Thomas King’s Green Grass, Running Water will be identified by the simple page numbers in brackets which all refer to King's novel in the afore mentioned edition.
however, a connection to Native Americans: Norma Smallwood, a Cherokee woman, became the first Miss America of Native decent.\textsuperscript{89} Perhaps this could be an indicator of her physical appearance, since the reader is left in the dark about this aspect as well. It could also stand for her being partially involved in the modern, western world, too.

Norma is certain of her Blackfoot identity and wants to impose this certainty in who she is and where she comes from on others. Her brother Eli says that she “[g]ot a real strong idea about how the world should look.” (380) She constantly tries to influence and help her sister’s son, Lionel Red-Dog, who seems to be rather lost in the world. She advises him to return to his roots and to re-organise his life. She accuses him of wanting to become a white man and obviously considers this as a major mistake because she keeps returning to this topic. But her surely well-meant comments seem to put Lionel under so much pressure that he often refuses to argue with her. She certainly does not leave him room to make up his own mind. She is, after all, very dominant and sure of herself.

2.2 Tradition

Traditions are one of the most important aspects of her life. She likes traditional music as can be inferred because she hums a “round-dance song” (103). She also knows about traditional cuisine. As Eli points out, she “[m]akes one hell of a stew” (403). She also speaks Blackfoot. (cf. 155) Eli has very pleasant memories of the Sun Dance he attended when he and his siblings were young. It is likely that Norma shares those memories, too. She also believes in traditional Indian medicine women (32).

Nature seems to be very important for her, too. When she talks about choosing the carpet during her first appearance in the novel the colours remind her of grass and sky.

Norma seems reliable and can be counted on. She is a focal point within the Blackfoot community. A symbol of this fact might be her tent at the Sun Dance. Latisha recalls that for as long as she can remember “Norma’s lodge was always in the same place […] And before that Norma’s mother.”\textsuperscript{90} (409) Norma wants to be this solid pillar and accepts this role willingly. When Eli and his wife Karen leave after their visit to the Sun Dance she tells them to come again some time and states: “We’ll be here” (231). It seems that she wants to assure them that they can rely on her.


\textsuperscript{90} It is interesting to note that Norma’s father is never mentioned at all. The reader simply does not know why he is not part of the family.
Norma clearly carries on traditions and wants to pass them on to others. She and her sister manage to reintegrate their brother Eli, who has been absent from the Sun Dance for many years and has become estranged from Blackfoot culture, and they make him take part in the ceremonial dancing.

She feels that it is important to transmit a concept of traditional values to the younger generations. When she talks about Alberta and Latisha coming home to the reserve to visit their families, she states that it has “to do with pride.” (84) She is proud of her Blackfoot heritage and generates most of her identity from it.

The ‘Narrative I’ tells Coyote that “[t]here are no truths […] Only stories” (432). Norma seems to agree with this statement and frequently creates her own versions of the truth. When she talks to Lionel it becomes obvious that she sometimes completely omits facts, like Latisha’s rather unfortunate choice of husband, or alters the chronology of events. She states that Eli came home after the Sun Dance. Reacting to Lionel’s protest “He came home after Granny died. […] And he came home then because he had retired.” (67) she presses that the result is what counts “He came home, nephew. That’s the important part.” (67) Especially this last remark shows that she is aware of her actions and her storytelling tradition where the truth is merely a matter of perspective. Lionel tries to convince her that she “can’t change the past” (32), but Norma does not think so. Stories and the process of storytelling are very significant not only in Indian tradition but also as part of the negotiation of identity. As already discussed above, identity is generated from common (hi)story and common myths. In this way Norma defines herself as Blackfoot. It is also a part of individual identity development. Norma organises the past to suit her point of view. She creates the past she needs to justify the present and in a way she also creates herself and her personality by telling her own version of events. This is one of the aspects that characterises her as a changing woman.

Norma pursues the Native way of ‘minding her relations’. She does not only care a lot about her own family but is also very friendly to the four old Indians. She accepts them as community elders and wants to help them. She is actually the one offering them a lift. In the car she makes conversation and wants to get to know them and inquires about their plans. Though her interest may or may not be genuine she at least proves that she has manners and respect for the elder members of community. She listens to the old Indians and does not want Lionel to


92 An example for this could be the ritualistic beginning of all chapters in King’s *The Truth About Stories*: Story changes due to story teller and audience, sometimes in the order of events, sometimes minor details. (cf. King: *The Truth About Stories*, p. 1). Hence there is no master narration. Norma seems to be aware of this.

93 McKay, ‘And that one takes a big bite of one of those nice red apples’, p. 6.
make fun of them. She even joins the four old Indians when they sing ‘Happy Birthday’ for Lionel.

She is also very sure of her position as a woman. She often invokes a sense of female community. When Eli and Karen are at the Sun Dance, she tells her brother to “[g]o outside and chop some wood or chew some grass.” – in other words typical male activities, whatever they may be. She continues with “Us women got talking to do.” (230) This talking and exchanging not only information but stories is considered a female quality. They “are often transmitters of culture”94 and Norma considers this duty to be very important.

Norma is autonomous and therefore personifies one of the essential aspects of Blackfoot values. Following McKay’s argumentation that all three Native female protagonists can be seen as ninauskitsipxpe, Norma is definitely a good example of an independent, elderly manly-hearted woman.

Norma can be seen as a guardian of traditions and a guide for others to get back to a more traditional way of life by practising what she preaches. She tries to become a guide for Lionel to help him to find out who he is and accept it. She is also the one who tries to explain to him how to understand Alberta, the woman he is in love with. “Norma […] had given Lionel the key to Alberta” (134) by telling him that all the younger woman really wants is a child.

In the final scene Norma is the one planning to rebuild the cabin her family used to live in. In contrast to some of the younger ones she is convinced that “Everything is still here” (461). She preserves parts of the old cabin (for example the log she and her sibling carved their names into) and establishes the tradition that the cabin has to be there. She keeps the family together and strengthens the community which often “depend[s] a great deal on the strength of women.” 95 When they start assessing the damage and recovering parts of the old material three generations are present: Norma as part of the ‘grandmother-generation’, Latisha, Alberta, Lionel and Charlie as the ‘adult-generation’ and Latisha’s children Christian, Benjamin and Elizabeth. All these are aspects of her function as a guardian.

3. Latisha: Toying and Trading with Tradition

3.1 Characterisation

Latisha Red Dog-Morningstar is Norma’s niece. She is the daughter of Norma’s sister Camelot and her husband Harley and is Lionel’s sister. Though she is frequently mentioned, especially by Norma, she makes her first appearance only at

94 Horne, Contemporary American Indian Writing, p. 47.
95 McKay, ‘And that one takes a big bite of one of those nice red apples’, p. 4.
the beginning of the second part. She is divorced, has three children and runs her own restaurant, the Dead Dog Café.

Latisha is in her early thirties. Her name can be traced back to the Latin noun ‘laetitia’ and means ‘joy’ or ‘happiness’. Though life has not always been kind to her, she seems rather content with who she is now and what she has made of her life. And she is definitely Norma’s pride and joy and, according to her, Latisha is “the smart one in the family” (32). Though nothing is said about her formal education, Latisha appears to be an intelligent woman who has developed a keen sense of assessing other people, probably through her work at the Dead Dog Café. She knows how to run a business and has been courageous enough to dare to become financially independent.

She values her family and, though she did not stay on the reserve, she lives close by and visits her parents regularly.

3.2 Husband

When Latisha was eighteen she met an American from Michigan called George Morningstar and quickly became attracted to him. He was not like the other men she knew. “Best of all, he did not look like a cowboy or an Indian.” In addition to him being different, his name sounded vaguely Indian and this seemed to appeal to Latisha. George’s name can actually be read as a reference to General George Custer who lost the battle and his life fighting Indians at Little Bighorn. Custer was called “Son of the Morning Star”. His namesake, George, seems to be very interested in Latisha and after less than a year they get married.

The relationship between George and Latisha can be seen as a history of colonialism as well as an illustration of the situation between Canada and the United States. George is depicted as the typical superficial US American, boasting about his county. He does not tire of comparing Canada and America.

He drones on how much better Americans are than Canadians (dependent vs. independent; adventurous vs. conservative). Latisha tries to reason with him and argues against him. She also warns that “those kinds of generalizations [are] almost always false.” (172) but he does not listen to her. He hides behind pseudo-

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96 She was eighteen when she met George, they were married for nine years, Elizabeth was born after they finally broke up.
97 In King’s famous short story “Borders” the young woman who moved to the United States is called “Laetitia”, which is another form of the name “Latisha” and could therefore be an alternative life of the Latisha in Green Grass, Running Water (if she had not stayed but moved away). Cf. Thomas King, “Borders”, in: Randall Bass / Joy Young (ed.), Beyond Borders. A Cultural Reader (Boston & others, 2003), pp. 37–47.
scientific explanations which he calls “[e]mpirical evidence” (172). At first Latisha is angry, but soon she becomes frustrated. She does not only think of herself as Canadian, she can indeed be seen as a personification of Canada. It is worth noticing that Latisha is willing to accept the qualities George ascribes to her. He sees her as an Indian and as Canadian. She reacts to that by incorporating these aspects of identity and by making them her own. Latisha’s creation of her own identity follows the pattern of reacting to outside influences and becoming who she is because she is proud of being different, of being “the Other”.

Following the second line of thought, McKay characterises the marriage of George and Latisha as “a microcosm of post-colonialism” George surely seems like an explorer and conqueror. At first he is fascinated by her being Indian. He has a romanticised picture of the First Nation’s way of life and wants to take everything in. However, he does not seem to picture her as a real person. He watches her like a programme on television. When she told him everything about herself and her life during one of their first dates, he simply “sat there and waited and listened, his mouth set in a pleasant smile, his blue eyes never blinking.” (145) He seems to be watching a Hollywood movie on Indians rather than having a conversation with a woman he likes. His pet name for her is “country”. He seems to think that he owns her and it is now his ‘responsibility’ to cultivate her. George wants to colonize her. His possessiveness does not hinder him having numerous affairs though, which he calls “lapses in judgement” (213). Again Latisha gets tired of hearing it and become “bored” (213) with his excuses.

Shortly after the marriage George turns out to be a man you love to hate. According to Lionel, George is Latisha’s biggest mistake. When she figured out that George “wondered so much about the world because he didn’t have a clue about life” (147) she was already pregnant and therefore avoided a separation. Latisha’s opinion of her husband gets very low. She does not consider him an intellectual equal. She thinks of him as a balloon (full of hot air but unsubstantial) onto which his “twinkling eyes, his wonderful smile, and his sparkling teeth were […] painted” (213). He is more of a clown than a partner to her. When she refuses to appreciate his new “Indian style jacket”, which looks ridiculous to her and when she does not show him much respect in front of her colleagues, he turns violent. When she

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99 Davidson draws parallels between the relationship between Latisha and George and 19th century cartoons on Canadian politics. Cf. Davidson, Border Crossings. Thomas King’s Cultural Inversions, p. 163.
100 McKay, ‘And that one takes a big bite of one of those nice red apples’, pp. 58-59.
102 Cf. Davidson, Border Crossings. Thomas King’s Cultural Inversions, p. 165.
103 When he had tried to show off and says “Most old things are worthless. This is history.” (215) referring to his John Wayne style jacket, she only shrugs and responds: “Guess you got to know which is which.” (215)
comes home that night he calmly turns the television off and brutally beats her up. Then he switches the machine back on as if nothing significant had happened at all. It seems like a commercial break more than anything else to him. Lionel says that he “used to beat hell out of her” (59). This combined with some of Latisha’s statements, suggests that routine domestic violence has developed. She thinks that one of the reasons why George beats her up is because he is bored.

George gets bored easily. He is very erratic and changes jobs all the time. Latisha can never count on him. Some time after the birth of their second child George dreams up the disastrous plan to stay at home, do the housework and look after the children. He starts his new career as a doting househusband by buying everything that might or might not be useful in a kitchen. Most of the kitchen implements are not even practical. Latisha is not thrilled by this, perhaps also because he is happy to spend her hard-earned money. But again her efforts to apply reason to the situation are not taken into account by George. During his rather unsuccessful cooking experiments he once nearly causes food poisoning by giving the children his version of ratatouille. About a week later he finally leaves the family.

All Latisha gets from him are long letters in which he tries to explain himself. He does not pay any kind of child support. Latisha is furious. She spends some time “burning eggs and banging pans” (275) at the restaurant to calm down. After nine years of marriage she is on her own with her two sons and soon discovers that she is pregnant again. First she feels “numb” (275) but soon she returns to being practical and down to earth as usual. George keeps on writing letters which she only laughs about. She sometimes even reads them to her female colleagues for general amusement but after a while these letters lose even their entertaining character for her and she simply stuffs them into a bag in her closet without reading them. The only reason she does not throw them away immediately is that she wants her children to have a chance to find out who their father is when they get older and want to know more about him.

When George turns up at the Sun Dance she immediately “step[s] back, setting a distance between herself” and George (412). She is tense and has clearly no further interest in him. She tells him that he does not have a place in her life. She confronts him with the fact that she does not read his letters anymore and tells him: “I don’t even think about you.”(419) This is only partly true because during the course of the novel she recalls some memories of her failed marriage and thus provides the reader with the needed background information through flashbacks. Nevertheless, she does not seem to miss him in the least.

Men no longer play a part in her life. She seems to have enough preoccupations.

It is interesting to note that there is a mythical Blackfoot character called ‘Woman Who Married Morning Star’. Though her story can only partly be compared to Latisha and her relationship with George, ‘Woman Who Married Morn-
ing Star’ returns to her family with her child.\footnote{Woman Who Married Morning Star is also closely connected to the ceremony of the Sun Dance. For further information see Kehoe, “Blackfoot Persons”, p. 117.} She also raises her offspring without a father.

In contrast to Latisha, her mother Camelot is one of the few women in the novel who seems to be happily married. But many other women share Latisha’s predicament. The problem of women being unhappily married can be traced throughout Green Grass, Running Water. This is not solely a problem of Native characters, of course. One of the American tourists visiting Latisha’s restaurant refers to marriage and states that “Every woman makes that mistake at least once” (143) and so confirms Latisha’s point of view that she is indeed better off without George.

3.3 Children

Latisha and George have three children. Their names are Christian, Benjamin and Elizabeth.\footnote{Incidentally these are also the names of Thomas King’s three children. Christian (*1971), the son of his first marriage with Kristine Adams), Benjamin (*1985) and Elizabeth (*1988) both with Helen Hoy. Cf. Andrews, “Thomas King”, p. 120.} All three names sound rather western and can perhaps partly be traced back to George’s influence. It is also part of the First Nation’s taking to European names. “Biblical names were common.”\footnote{David H. French / Kathrine S. French, “Personal Names”, in: Ives Goddard (ed.), Languages, Handbook of Native American Indians, Volume 17 (Washington, 1996), p. 216.} Christian’s name can obviously be traced back to religion. Benjamin could either be read with a biblical connotation or as a reference to Benjamin Franklin and thus to the United States. Elizabeth is also a Hebrew name and appears in the Bible. It can also, of course, be an allusion to Queen Elizabeth. This would foreshadow that the toddler Elizabeth might become powerful or at least in control of her own life when she grows up.

Latisha stresses that her children are Canadian. This is of course a form of resistance which opposes George’s idealising America. Latisha used to take baby Christian into the bedroom and take comfort in holding her child, gaining strength to endure George’s arguments. “There, in the warm darkness, she would stroke her son’s head and whisper ferociously over and over again until it became a chant, a mantra, ‘You are a Canadian. You are a Canadian.’” (176) Latisha seems to want to reassure the child as well as herself of their distinct identity. It is worth noticing, however, that she does not say ‘You are a Blackfoot.’ This could be traced back to the Canadian legislation prior to 1985. Since 1951, as an addition to the Indian Act of 1876, ethnic origin was no longer inherited through the mother.\footnote{Cf. James S. Frideres, Native People in Canada. Contemporary Conflicts (Scarborough, 1983), pp. 6-7.} The legal distinction between Indians and non-Indians was very strict.
Section 12.(1) part b stated that “a woman who married a person who is not an Indian”108 was no longer entitled to register as an Indian and she lost “her Indian status for herself and for her children.”109 This section of the Indian Act was only changed in 1985 by the introduction of Bill C-31. Since then Indian status is no longer lost through marriage.110 Still this might be the reason why Latisha stresses her children’s Canadianness so much.111

Latisha’s children are shown as individual persons in the novel. They are not simply depicted as the children and this demonstrates that they are an important part of Latisha’s life and that being a mother is part of her identity.

Christian is the oldest son. He is approximately ten and already bears much responsibility also for his younger siblings. He seems to try to be ‘the man of the house’. Since Latisha has to work late, Christian does the cooking at home. He tries his best but it is a little too much to ask of him. He is too young to cook a well-balanced diet for himself and his brother and sister. So he is always preparing spaghetti, sometimes mixed with hot dogs. He is, after all, still a child himself. Though he needs more help and does tasks that should be done by adults, at least most of the time, he is still creative and does what he can. Though Latisha thinks of it as disgusting, Christian prepares a kind of milkshake, consisting of milk and coke, for his sister who obviously likes it. He also makes the children’s breakfast and walks his younger brother to school. He feels under a lot of pressure. There is a conflict developing between Christian and Latisha. Because he is the oldest he has to do most of the housework. Latisha desperately needs her children to help her to keep the household running. But when she states “Look, guys, […] I could need some help around here” (214) Christian points out that he does “everything already.” (212) and asks her “What do you think this is?” (214). He is upset about the whole situation. His anger can be seen in remarks like “take me for granted” (273). Latisha definitely feels guilty but does not have the capacity to make life easier for her son. All she can do is tell him that she is sorry and that his help is much appreciated. Despite all the tension between them they still have a rather close relationship. Christian feels responsible for his mother but at times he can also be a child for brief periods. He still lets her hug him. Christian is also the one starting to think about his identity as a Blackfoot. When he and Latisha watch TV in the evening he asks what would happen if the Indian in the western won. He is still able to wonder about life and ask questions which only children would think of asking. He concludes that there is not “much point in watching it” (216) if the

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108 Frideres, Native People in Canada, p. 8.
109 Ibid., p. 10.
110 However there are other problems with Bill C-31. For further information see David Alan Long / Olive Patricia Dickason, Visions of the Heart. Canadian Aboriginal Issues (Toronto & others, 1996), p. 105 or King, The Truth About Stories, pp. 141-144.
111 For this line of thoughts cf. Davidson, Border Crossings. Thomas King’s Cultural Inversions, p. 166.
Indigenous Women in King’s Green Grass, Running Water

Indians always lose. Films, like life, should not be doomed from the start, he feels and probably subconsciously reflects upon his own chances in life.

Benjamin is a quiet child. He seems rather shy, does not eat his breakfast and seems a little passive. When he was a baby, he used to cry until Latisha would come to pick him up - in contrast to Christian who shouted for his mummy. Benjamin is four or five years old. Latisha and George had planned to have him, so that their older son would have company and that they, in turn, would save their marriage.

Elizabeth is the youngest but also the most determined of the three children. She is about two years old. She is smart and headstrong. Her birth “had been a surprise.” (213) Elizabeth is a fighter. In contrast to her brothers, she would try to get out of the cradle when she woke up instead of shouting or crying. At her first few attempts she falls out of the crib. But she only cries twice. Afterwards she does not cry any longer but keeps practising so that within a week she is able to get out on her own without falling and this proves once again that she is “[s]ilent and determined” (268). She also demands attention. In the morning she comes to Latisha and shouts: “Get up, Mummy!” (269). She also repeats what she wants until her demands are met. One of her typical sentences is “Yes, I can” (271). It is more than a new phrase that she picked up. It shows Elizabeth’s approach to life. She is going to get what she wants and be who she wants. She is depicted as a miniature version of a strong, self-assured Native woman.

The children have a close relationship with each other. Though they fight, like all siblings do, they stick together and know they can rely on one another. An example of this is that in the evening Benjamin and Elizabeth fall asleep on the sofa “curled up against each other.” (216) They feel safe together. It is a peaceful picture.

On the other hand, a spiral of violence can already be detected. When Christian is annoyed by his mother, he calls his brother names. As a reaction Benjamin plays rougher with Elizabeth who gets hurt in the process. Frustration and violence (emotional, verbal or physical) are passed on. Only Elizabeth seems to withstand the vicious cycle, perhaps partly because there is no one younger to be mistreated. But she does not cry and stubbornly repeats her favourite phrase of the day “I like it.” (274)

For Latisha raising three children on her own is simply too much. She does not appear to be a typical ‘good’ mother because the children are often left alone but she loves them dearly. Though she is stressed, for example during the breakfast situation, she controls herself and tries not to squeeze Elizabeth’s hand too hard when trying to stop her making a mess. She does not want any harm to come to her children. Another sign of her care is that, though she has plenty on her mind, she knows the names of Elizabeth’s teacher and friends at school. Despite all the stress Latisha still thinks that having children on her own “is not a bad idea.” (407) Though they take lots of energy, they also give her a lot.
Latisha does not consider leaving her children with her parents, Norma or anybody else. The three youngsters are important for her and form a huge part of her identity. She sees herself as a tough business woman and as a mother at the same time. She cannot and does not want to be restricted to either category.

3.4 Work and Tradition

Latisha is financially independent. Norma states that her niece “makes her own luck.” (59). She is who she is because she wants it this way. She runs her own restaurant, the Dead Dog Café. The ‘Dead Dog’ is popular with residents as well as tourists. “People come from all over the world to eat at the Dead Dog Café.” (59) Business seems to be good. Latisha can afford to employ three people beside herself. She has a good relationship with her employees, Billy, Cynthia and Rita. Latisha herself works hard and does long hours. Though the business requires a lot of time and inner strength, she likes it and seems to be proud of what she has achieved.

The Dead Dog Café is also a key to Latisha’s understanding of tradition. In a way she mocks western expectations and colonial mimicry. She creates her own tradition and in so doing creates part of her own identity as well. In his book Useable Pasts Tad Tuleja states that “the politically powerless may also have the power to invent” and Latisha proves this.

The business concept of the Dead Dog Café is that she invents the tradition that the Blackfoot used to hunt and eat dog. This is entirely made up. Lionel states ever so often “The Blackfoot didn’t eat dog.” (59) but the concept catches on. The tourists think that they are served real dog meat. The exotic and grotesque is popular with the tourists. It shows effectively that the former colonisers like the picture Latisha creates and they want it to be true. “Latisha effectively negotiates the white stereotypes and profits from them.” She is rather bold with her lies to keep up the image. When a tourist asks whether they are really allowed to slaughter black Labradors, Latisha claims that “It’s a treaty right.[...] It’s one of our traditional foods.” (144) After that, no one seems offended any longer or to ques-


113 This term will be used in the following, though it bears problems as discussed above.

114 Tuleja, Useable Pasts, p.2. In his introduction Tuleja refers to approaches by Hobshawn and Ranger and extends them.

tion her word. Nobody knows what these treaties actually say but they make every story more believable for whites.

The Dead Dog Café’s secrets (except for decent food) are “the ambience and the reputation” (117). To give the place a touch of fake authenticity she had a photographer take pictures to convey the image of a long Indian hunting tradition. Interestingly this photographer, Will Horse Capture, is an intertextual visitor from Thomas King’s first novel *Medicine River*. These pictures explicitly play with white colonial fantasies: They are “like those you see in the hunting [...] magazines where a couple of white guys are standing over an elephant” (117) These pictures of Indians and dogs are also sold as postcards along with menus at the restaurant. To complete the image, they also play ‘Indian’ music like the “Chief Mountain singers or that group from Brocket” (118) and have a “neon sign of a dog in a stewpot” (118). Billy also dresses up to look Indian for the tourists. Again authenticity is not part of the concept. He asks Latisha which look he should choose for the day: “Plains, Southwest, or combination?” (116). This implies he aims to resemble the image how tourists would expect an Indian to look like, which does not correspond to reality; the mixture of different tribal dress strongly suggests that the Indian the tourists have in mind is a product of imagination vaguely based partly on reality.

Latisha creates this part of her identity herself and changes history to suit her purpose. She acts as a changing woman not only with regard to Blackfoot tradition but also to her own story.

There are some more jokes hidden in the concept of the café. The name “Dead Dog” can be read as an anagram, as Coyote suggests earlier in the novel and so the ‘dog’ turns into ‘god’ and hence it is a pun on Nietzsche’s “God is Dead.” It could be read as a way of stating that Native traditions have been able to adapt to new circumstances and have succeeded over western and also Christian culture. Another example of wordplay is the name of the dish “Old Agency Puppy Stew”. Only few tourists but most of the Native visitors will know that “Old Agency is a Blackfoot settlement.”

The Native residents react positively to the restaurant being founded on a non-existent tradition. They know that the supposed dog-meat is beef and they basically get the same kind of stew everyday but with a different, fancy name. Nevertheless, they think, like Norma, that it is “[n]ice to have a real Indian restaurant in town” (59).

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119 Flick, “Reading Notes”, p. 150.
Perhaps Latisha’s ability to combine Native cuisine with pragmatism and innovative concepts has been handed down to her in part by her mother. Camelot is a terrific cook. At the same time, she likes trying new recipes while transforming them in a way to make the ingredients fit the local traditional cuisine. When she prepares “Hawaiian Curdle Surprise” (188) she substitutes octopus with moose. The result is clearly delicious but does not necessarily have much in common with the original recipe. She “playfully [applies] postmodern strategy: she uses familiar Native ingredients which reconfigure the recipe in an entirely new (and successful) way.” Latisha has a similar talent for using common ingredients and her own imagination to create something new and attractive. She carries her mother’s idea of cooking one step further. She does not traditionalise new recipes but invents a new tradition to fit old recipes.

The concept for the Dead Dog Café can be traced back to Norma and her meddelling. Latisha knows that “in fact, it had been her auntie’s idea.” (117), but in contrast to her brother she listened to the older woman, took her advice and used it as inspiration. It is an indicator for Latisha’s role in the female Blackfoot society that she allows herself to be helped but also helps others in return.

Latisha believes in traditional values like ‘family’. Living close to the reserve she often visits her family, according to Norma. She also “[a]lways helps with the food for the Sun Dance.” (60) She regularly attends the ceremony as well. Again in contrast to her brother she keeps coming to the Sun Dance, “spending much time helping her mother and Norma fix the food and assist the women’s society.” (372) The women’s society is not a European style club but describes simply the community and support network the females of a tribe have. They also talk a lot about family, upcoming marriages and children (cf. 374), hence there is again the aspect of communication and storytelling. Latisha also always takes the children with her to the Sun Dance. While Christian, Benjamin and Elizabeth stay with their grandparents, Latisha stays with Norma in her lodge. This could be a hint that Latisha is going to keep up Norma’s tradition of always staying at the same spot and thus take over her role as transmitter of culture and tradition.

Latisha knows that the Sun Dance is specific to her people and is proud of this tradition. She also realises at a fairly early age that the ceremony cannot be explained properly to someone who is unable or unwilling to understand its cultural context. At school she tried to explain the ceremony and its importance to a classmate. The other girl, Ann Hubert, tried only to compare the tradition with what she knew of the religious rituals of Roman Catholicism. She saw the women’s society as equivalent to the Catholic Women’s League. The problem of the barriers of discourse are strongly present here. (cf. 409-410) Latisha experiences what it feels like to be judged inappropriately with false or erroneous categories.

120 McKay, ‘And that one takes a big bite of one of those nice red apples’, pp. 80-81.
Her only visit with George to the Sun Dance confirms her earlier experiences. They spend their honeymoon there. For George is “[j]ust like the movies.” (373), reality is not part of the equation. It is one big event for him and he does not understand half of what is going on around him. Interestingly he does not want to go to the Sun Dance again. He says it “just wouldn’t be the same” (377). This shows that he has created a mental picture of the ceremony. He does not want to be burdened by another real Sun Dance or a deeper understanding of it. For Latisha the Sun Dance remains a vital part of her cultural identity anyway. She does not mind much being called “old-fashioned” by George when he appears at the Sun Dance to take pictures. She accepts that this tradition is part of her and lives on through her.

Latisha shows how to play with stereotypes and how to live in a western-dominated world shaped by prejudices. She is also the one of the three female protagonists who has the most practical approach to life.

Latisha “is on her way to gaining the status of one of the ninauposkitzipxpe”.¹²¹ She owns her own restaurant and proves to be a good manager and an effective worker.¹²² She also supports the other women. She helps Norma and looks after Alberta when she is pregnant. She helps others to be able to change and to lead the life they want.

4. Alberta: Independent, Intellectual and Inexplicably Pregnant

4.1 Characterisation

Alberta is a cousin of Latisha’s. The two women are roughly the same age. While Latisha is more practical, Alberta is the intellectual of the family.

Alberta is headstrong and independent and likes to be in control, at least of her own life. Her surname, Frank¹²³, can directly be transferred to her overall behaviour. Her first name is, obviously, the name of one of Canada’s western provinces. This makes her subject to colonialism as well as a central character in the story, even by name, because Norma and the others live on the reserve in Blos-

¹²¹ McKay, ‘And that one takes a big bite of one of those nice red apples’, p. 82.
¹²² Cf. Chapter 1.2.
¹²³ The surname “Frank” is also used by King in two of his short stories: “One Good Story, That One” and “Magpies”. The first name “Alberta” reappears in the same collection of short stories entitled “Trap Lines “. Cf. Thomas King, One Good Story, That One (Toronto, 1993)
som, Alberta. Her name could also be a reference to the place Frank in Alberta on the Turtle River, which was buried in 1903 by a famous landslide.124

In contrast to the other two women the reader actually gets to know how she looks. When she goes to the Shagagappi, a lounge, she describes her reflection in one of the windows. She has “[d]ark, sleek, luxuriant hair, thin ankles, good legs, nice smile” (71). The fact that none of the three women is described in detail could be seen as a reference to the way women dress in a spiritual context. “The women’s apparent modesty comes from self-confidence”125, Kehoe states. This suggests that they do not need status symbols or striking clothes to be who they are.

Alberta enjoys being independent and free. Driving in her car on her own suggests part of this freedom to her. “Alberta clearly chooses her transportation technology on the basis of her ability to control it.”126 She is a modern woman and uses modern technology casually because they are simply part of her life. She is, generally speaking, a rational person and likes to think through her options before acting. She also uses this method when making her mind up about private matters. She enjoys being sexually independent but is torn between her fear of losing her freedom and her desperate wish to have a baby. This is the one big issue she contemplates most of the time.

When she talks to Latisha, she sums up her life in a melancholy way: “Two men, a good job, no responsibilities. What have I got to complain about?” (343) But she is not happy and she knows it.

4.2 Work

Alberta teaches First Nation History at Calgary University. The first episode she appears in does not only introduce her and her work but also confronts the reader directly with an episode of Indian history. The boredom of her students can be seen in two different ways: on the one hand it could suggest, that she has difficulty motivating her students, but on the other hand the students, all bearing names of historical importance, do not care at all about Natives and their history and no matter how well it is presented their minds are occupied with other matters. The reader seems to see the class from Alberta’s perspective. She explains part of the lethargy with the fact that it is “[F]riday afternoon.” (17)

Though students are not as fascinated by the topic as she is, she likes her job. At one point she tells Charlie: “I like teaching, […] Some of my students may be dumb, but they’re not sleazy.” (125) She is also aware of the importance of her teaching. When she turns off a Western on TV she admits that “[t]eaching West-

124 Cf. Flick, “Reading Notes”, p. 144, also suggests that this could be one of the events Dr. Houvagh points out.
125 Kehoe, “Blackfoot Persons”, p. 121.
126 Johnson, “Plastic Shaman in the Global Village”, p. 32.
ern history was trial enough without having to watch what the movie makers had made out of it.” (241) This is significant because it is the picture of the Hollywood movies that most whites have in mind when talking about Indians and she tries to overcome this lopsided view of Native history.

Like her uncle Eli she teaches at university. But while he used to teach English literature in Toronto and wrote books on Shakespeare and Bacon she focuses on her heritage.

Social science studies have revealed that “contact with more than one culture has been seen in a positive light. Multicultural exposure may make individuals stronger and enable them to function appropriately in two (or more) cultural worlds.”¹²⁷ This seems to be true for Alberta who is sure of her roots but is also successful in a western, male-dominated world. “Being Indian isn’t a profession” (155), Eli points out during the course of the novel. Knowing this, Alberta is wise enough to accept her being Blackfoot as part of her identity. She proves that it is possible to be both: a Blackfoot woman and a university professor.

Nevertheless, she has to fight this social stigma. This becomes most obvious when she checks in at Blossom Lodge. The receptionist, a “thin, older man” (169), does not treat her as attentively and politely as he does later when Dr. Hovaugh, a white American, arrives. At this point “normative gender roles”¹²⁸ and prejudices against Native people can be seen. When she asks the clerk for the university discount he clearly does not think of her as being an academic. When she shows him her university card all he has to offer for an excuse is: “You can’t always tell by looking” (194). Clearly annoyed she snaps back: “How true […] I could have been a corporate executive.” (195)

When Charlie arrives at the same hotel, he is only slightly better treated, which reinforces the notion that the receptionist does not think much of Indians and even less of Indian women. It might be an indicator of how hard Alberta has had to work to be where she is now academically.

4.3 Relationships

Alberta was married once and her marriage quickly turned out to be a disaster. She made the “mistake of getting married young” in her early twenties (91). Bob was “handsome and witty” (91) and she wanted to escape from her life at the reserve. The beginning of the marriage was happy, but then he made a “ridiculous request” (91). She should finish her degree but only later, after she had helped him to get his qualifications and their children were old enough. He suggests she should get a job and half jokes: “You don’t want to spend the rest of your life in a tepee” (92).

He plays with her fear of not being able to become what she wants – a successful academic – and wants her to work to fulfill his need for luxury. Their marriage was short. They were married only one year after they met, divorced after another. “[T]he only apparent casualty was the semester Alberta missed trying to convince Bob that there wasn’t another man.” (92) Though put in a humorous way by the means of personification of an administrative period of time the harsh truth is that Bob could not understand Alberta’s desire for education and a fulfilling career. Alberta’s conclusion: “Bob wanted a wife; he did not want a woman.” (93) For Alberta, a woman can also be a wife but not as the essence of her very being.

Her father, Amos, also features as a bad example. Amos was a dreamer who turned into a heavy drinker 129 so that Alberta’s mother, Ada, had to support the family mainly on her own. She does not allow herself to be victimized though. 130 Ada is depicted as a strong woman who is down to earth and is a fighter. It is likely that Alberta has inherited part of her determination and strength from her mother. However, Alberta has also experienced what life is like with a husband who is more of a burden than a support, so she cuts her losses and gets divorced quickly instead of trying to stay with her husband. Alberta reaches the conclusion that men “all demanded something, insisted on privileges, special favors.” (97)

She actually compares being married to being trapped with fellow passengers on a flight. (91) She is clearly afraid of losing her freedom and wants to avoid a second marriage if possible. Sometimes Alberta seems to wonder whether marriage could really be as bad as she thinks. But when she asks Latisha about the subject, her cousin and friend only confirms her worst thoughts. Alberta is sure that marriage is something to be avoided at (nearly) all costs.

After her failed marriage Alberta started dating two men at the same time: Charlie Looking Bear and Lionel Red Dog, Latisha’s brother. She figured that two was just the right number, when one got too possessive she would spend more time with the other and vice versa. She “like[s] having two men in her life” (45). She is afraid of one single relationship “in which events were supposed to rumble along progressively” (46). She opposes this linear thinking and feels restricted in her individual freedom by society’s rules regarding a proper relationship. “Alberta knew that apart from no men in her life, two was the safest number” (46). She

129 The issue of female alcohol and drug abuse is not mentioned in Green Grass, Running Water though the problem exists. For this topic cf. Christine T. Lowery, “A Qualitative Model of Long-Term Recovery for American Indian Women”, in: Hilary N. Weaver, Voices of First Nations People: Human Services Considerations (New York & others, 1999), pp. 35-50. But still this is one of the few occasions when King addresses the topic of Native alcohol abuse. King himself states in his interview with Jeffrey Canton: “I don’t think that I need stay away from some problems that Native communities face – alcoholism, drug abuse, child abuse – but I do have a responsibility not [sic] to make those such a part of my fiction that I give the impression to the reader that this is what drives Native communities.” Canton, “Coyote Lives. Thomas King”, p. 94.

130 Cf. McKay, ‘And that one takes a big bite of one of those nice red apples’, p. 55.
Indigenous Women in King’s *Green Grass, Running Water*

loves being in control, especially in terms of relationships. She is fond of the idea of “[h]er city, her house, her terms.” (45)

She is honest to both of them. They both know that she is also seeing the other one. When Charlie asks her whether she is serious about Lionel, she answers: “No […] And I’m not serious about you, either.” (43) When Charlie talks about his feelings for her, she always cuts him short. She is convinced that “[m]en want […] to be married” (46) and that is the one thing she is not willing to do again.

Though Charlie and Lionel are serious about wanting to marry her it can be suggested that their attitudes towards Alberta would lead to another disastrous marriage.

Charlie is not monogamous either. He has several other girls whom he refers to as “diversions” (125). He actually has a list to tick off when he tries to call former flames. Charlie also thinks about acting as if he was helpless to get Alberta’s attention and love. He fails to see that this is exactly what she despises. The fact that they both stay at the same hotel without knowing that the other is there and without actually meeting one another can be seen as an image of their whole relationship: Though they share certain aspects of their lives, they are not close at all.

Lionel, on the other hand, understands that Alberta “was solid and responsible. She had a good education and a good job.” (132) He even partly accepts Alberta as an “independent woman” (188) but this thought is combined with the question of choosing rings, not the actual decision about marriage. He also fantasises about her leaving her job for a while to be his doting wife and the mother of his children.

Alberta fears that “[m]aybe all men […] are like that, Charlies and Lionels. Or worse. Maybe, in the end, they all turned into Amoses” (201) In the end she does not choose either. She does not go away with Charlie and does not make any suggestions to Lionel that their relationship might work out. She remains independent.

There are some further indications in the novel pointing to her sexual freedom. This can be detected when Alberta talks to Connie, the officer she reports her stolen car to. Connie offers her a lift and the two women immediately start talking and seem to like each other. The whole scene has the touch of a first date. “Connie and Alberta sat in the patrol car until the windows fogged up and the rain ran to drizzle.” (343) This sentence clearly evokes the image of a couple of teenagers alone a car, being sexually engaged.131 When Alberta finally gets out of the car she actually asks Connie: “You want to come in and get some coffee?” (345) Again this sounds like a cheap chat up line. There might be some subtle homoerotic attraction between the two women.

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The topics Alberta and Connie talk about are very private for two people meeting for the first time as well. One of Connie’s first questions is “You got any kids?” (339) She also supports Alberta’s wish to stay unmarried. “No law says you got to do that [be married]. Man’s a nice thing to have around but so’s a dishwasher.” (340-341) Connie is another example of an early marriage that did not work out. She married aged 17, and by the time she was 23 she had had her four kids and was divorced aged only 27.

The fact that the possibility of a lesbian relationship is hinted at shows that Alberta definitely does not sexually depend on men. Another sign of this is her experience with Latisha’s hairdryer. When she dries herself after being soaked in the rain, Alberta observes that “working the nozzle of the hair dryer in particular directions felt slightly erotic.” (393) She knows that men are not the only answer to sexual satisfaction. She even says jokingly to Latisha that Lionel should “get his own hair dryer” (395). She is not going to be his object of pleasure.

Alberta does not want to be dominated by men. She enjoys “male company on her own terms, while still refusing to be the passive object of man’s desires and control.”

Lastly the relationship between Alberta and Latisha deserves a brief analysis. The two women are obviously close and they laugh together and joke around like very good friends. Latisha is also the first one to suggest that Alberta suffers from symptoms (nausea, aching breasts, dizziness) she experienced herself when she was pregnant. They talk for over an hour at the Dead Dog Café and Alberta tells her everything that has been troubling her lately. Latisha comments that “[a]rtificial insemination part was wonderful. With alternatives like Lionel and Charlie, it makes perfect sense.” (394) Latisha’s loyalty to Alberta is stronger than the one to her own brother. She also sums up Alberta’s current position nicely:

Now let me get this straight. Attractive university professor. No, that’s sexist. Successful university professor seeking employment as a single parent desires discreet short-term relationship with attractive, considerate person. Men need not apply. Intercourse not required. (394)

She can tell what the matter is with her friend but can also still make her laugh about all her cares and worries. It suggests that Latisha wants Alberta to carry on and not give up or become desperate. Problems tend to look a lot less threatening when one can make fun of them. This is what Latisha teaches her friend.

Latisha is also the one taking Alberta with her to the Sun Dance to reconnect her with the rest of the family, the women’s society and her own roots. She also supports Alberta when it turns out that she is really pregnant. She helps her through the mud at the former site of Eli’s cabin. None of the men present, Charlie or Lionel, thinks about giving Alberta a helping hand. Latisha also puts her

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132 Davidson, Border Crossings. Thomas King’s Cultural Inversions, p. 170.
arms around Alberta (cf. 464), which can be seen as a gesture of comfort as well as of protection and affection. Alberta seems to feel more at ease when Latisha is around. After she arrives at the Dead Dog Café, she seems to have come home and stops being tough and strong all the time but lets the other women see her weaknesses and accepts their help.

The friendship between Latisha and Alberta is a balance of give and take. After all it is Alberta who realises immediately that Latisha is tense and might need help when George turns up at the Sun Dance. The two women are linked by a strong bond of female friendship so that each one seems to sense what the other needs most at the time.

4.4 Children
Alberta desperately wants a child but is not fond of the option of getting a father as a partner, too. She thinks about different options of how to have a baby: Option one would be to repress her fears and marry either Lionel or Charlie. To her this option is simply “obscene” (69). Her second option would mean explaining her need to them and hope they would understand and help her. Or she could simply forget contraception. Alberta realises that option two leads directly back to option one and would additionally involve a “masculine muscle-flexing contest” (70) because each man would want to know who the father was. Her third option was to “pick out a decent-looking man, and use him as a willing but uninformed father” (70). She is frightened when she considers the possibility and is not very fond of the idea. Another problem she does not even consider is what she would tell her child when he/she grows up and wants to know who his/her father is. After plenty of pondering she decides to try option three as “the lesser of two evils” (71) though she still has her doubts. She picks a bar called the ‘Shagganappi’ for her potential father material hunt. The name of the club can be read as a book title as well as a pun on “shag a nappy” 133. She wants intercourse which should ultimately result in her having a baby. However, she does not manage to bring herself to enter the Shagganappi and is angry with herself.

After this experience she starts considering a fourth option: artificial insemination. Though she is “sceptical and unconvinced” (195) at first, she tries and consults her gynaecologist, a Japanese woman called Mary Takai.134 The major problem turns out to be that “[m]ost clinics won’t take single women.” (197) They all seem to think that it is not morally correct to have a child on one’s own.

But this is the one thing Alberta is sure about: “I just want a child. I don’t want a husband.” (198) One clinic seems to be willing to accept her, nevertheless.

133 Flick, “Reading Notes”, p. 149.
134 Interestingly the doctor has a non-white ethnic background, too. The fact that they are both women and not part of the white majority culture might add to the statement that “Alberta felt comfortable talking with her.” (197)
It takes nine months, in other words the length of a normal pregnancy, until Alberta hears from the Bennett Clinic. She has to fill in 24 pages of forms. Finally she is invited for an interview with the psychologist at the clinic. Alberta is asked to make sure that she brings her husband along. When she tells the woman on the phone that she is not married, the clinic assistant does not react to her repeated objections and rumbles on that if the husband is not present “we have to start all over again.” (201) The same is true for Alberta’s quest for a child. Understandably she calls her desire to become a mother “complications” (47).

Norma understands Alberta and tries to explain to Lionel that all Alberta wants are children, not a husband. “A woman who gets married and has a child winds up with two babies right off the bat” (135), she says. Norma also remarks soberly that the “Day after we find some other way to get pregnant, you guys will be as attractive as week-old fry bread.” (135) Alberta would definitely agree with this statement.

Alberta’s situation is changed by some form of mythical intervention. When she takes a combined shower and bath at the hotel, she has her usual fantasies involving having a baby. Her dream usually does not last long because the child turns into Lionel or Charlie when she has “settled it on a breast” (280) in her imagination or she fears that it has died or drowned. This time, however, the nightmares do not come. The idea of Alberta becoming pregnant while having a bath can be compared to the Navaho story of Changing Woman and her sister. In the end Changing Woman’s sister becomes pregnant by a cloud of rain.135 At this point the realistic plot mixes with the fantastic one. Thomas King softens the lines between reality and imagination.136 Coyote takes responsibility for the miraculous pregnancy. He tells the four old Indians that he was helpful: “That woman who wanted a baby. Now, that was helpful.” The old Indians are not too thrilled by his doings. Robinson Crusoe asks him: “You remember that last time you did that?” And Hawkeye reminds the others: “We haven’t straightened out that mess yet.” (456) These sentences make it clear that here the Biblical story of the immaculate conception is parodied.

But Alberta does not know that Coyote has interfered with her wishes. After the bath she feels “exhausted, drained, nauseous” (282) and, though she does not know why, she returns to bed. When she wakes up, she is hungry. She shows the typical stages of an early pregnancy. She is also emotionally unstable due to her hormones having to adjust to the new situation. She cries and laughs a lot. The nausea is her biggest problem. It seems to get stronger when she thinks of Lionel.

Indigenous Women in King’s *Green Grass, Running Water* and Charlie. She clearly does not want any of them having anything to do with her child.

Afterwards she seems to be more in unison with nature and does not resist its powers: She keeps standing in the parking lot of Latisha’s café and gets soaking wet without caring much. She seems a little like a plant that needs to be watered to grow. The rain fertilises the child growing in her. Here the name of the place, Blossom, provides an interesting twist. When reading the direction aloud one does not necessarily hear the comma and so Blossom, Alberta can be interpreted as Blossom Alberta! which can, of course, be connected to her pregnancy.137

For a long time Alberta does not believe that her wish has finally come true. On the way to the Sun Dance she repeatedly tells Latisha that: “There’s no way I can be pregnant.” (407) Alberta does not admit to herself even when Latisha and Norma are convinced of it and give her advice. She still denies it when she has to throw up in the morning. But at the end of the novel she seems to have found her peace and embraces the thought of becoming a mother soon.

She inverts the so-called seduction plot: She is a successful woman and actually wants to have an illegitimate child.138 She carries also the hope for the future. Though Eli died when the dam broke and the cabin was destroyed, Alberta’s decision to stay and probably raise her child as part of the Blackfoot community gives a positive outlook on things to come and confirms the circular structure of the story.

Her pregnancy also gives an interesting association in the context for the discourse on colonisation. “Pregnancy literally embodies the concept [...] of accepting the "other" within [sic] oneself.”139 In a postcolonial sense this means that Alberta also combines her academic, western world with her native roots. Taking a step further it could also mean that she embodies Coyote as a mythical figure who stands for alternative versions of the truth. This would lead to her accepting these different stories and miraculous elements into her way of life and her way of thinking, which have been rather logical and scientific so far.

In any case, the child gives Alberta the chance to become who she wants to be and therefore enables her to create a new facet of her identity.

4.5 Tradition

Alberta seems to be the one of the three women who is furthest away from the reserve and life there – physically as well as metaphysically. During the course of the novel she comes home and probably reunites with the family she once fled from by going to university and also the part of her cultural identity she left be-

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137 This aspect is also discussed in anon., “Theorizing Coyote’s Cannon”, p. 16.
139 Smith, *Sacrifice and the ‘Other’*, p. 58.
Franziska Frome

The fact that she teaches Native history at university suggests that she has never really denied her Indian roots. Her being present at the Sun Dance and wanting to give Norma a helping hand rebuilding the cabin shows that she has not many difficulties blending back in and apparently she does not mind living in a traditional Blackfoot community. Alberta represents the academically successful Native woman. But she is "also on her way to becoming a ninapokitzipxpe figure as she exemplifies competence and autonomy in her teaching career." She is also sexually independent, another quality associated with the manly-hearted women. Alberta can be seen as an incarnation of or at least a close relative of the mythical Changing Woman.

Alberta is also the woman around whom the story itself evolves. Lionel and Charlie are driven a great deal by her actions and as her name suggests she is at the centre of many parts of the story. Her pregnancy also represents a new beginning and thus keeps the tradition going.

5. Other Female Characters

5.1 Mythical Women

In the stories told by the four old Indians, four different mythological women appear: First Woman, Changing Woman, Thought Woman and Old Woman. The mythical stories all draw on the Earth Diver stories, where the main character falls out of the sky. In their stories western master narratives and Judaeo-Christian tales are adapted and interwoven with First Nation creation myths. In this way a different shade of the truth is presented. An alternative master narrative with alternative main protagonists, heroes who do not have to be male and have a different approach to life are created. Thus King changes the Eurocentric, patriarchal way of thinking. At the same time he also stresses the importance of self-conscious, independent women who are always the ones who adapt to new situations and try to reason with the rather stubborn and often not too bright male characters. The male characters in the creation stories are unable “to adapt to their surroundings, preferring instead to confront their environment and thus try to impose their own sense of order and hierarchy upon it.”

140 McKay, ‘And that one takes a big bite of one of those nice red apples’, p. 84.
First Woman originates in the Navaho tradition. At the beginning she presents a different version of the Genesis story of Adam and Eve in Paradise. Ahdamn, First Woman’s male counterpart, starts with the colonial naming and claiming process. He defines things and expects them to accept this, which they obviously do not. Though he should realize that his method is not working he does not consider changing it to adapt it to the situation. He also fails to notice that these animals already have names. Like a western coloniser he does not realise that there are already other structures. First Woman does not get along with “stingy” (73), “grouchy” (74) GOD and so they leave the garden. First Woman turns into The Lone Ranger, a character from popular American Wild West fiction.

Changing Woman, also based on the Navaho tradition, first encounters Noah, who chases her and is only driven by sexual desire. She later meets Herman Melville’s Captain Ahab who is searching for Moby Dick. Another twist in the canonical literature turns Moby Dick into Moby-Jane, the great black whale. Gender and race concepts are hence reversed. In connection with femininity there are also many references to Moby-Jane being lesbian (the sailors on the ship shout: “Blackwhaleblackwhaleblackwhalesbianblackwhalesbianblackwhale” (220) and combine her being a whale with a hint at her sexual orientation. There seems to develop a brief relationship between Changing woman and Moby-Jane. The whale uses the chat up line: “I know just the place.” (22) Changing Woman is sad to see Moby-Jane go back to work: she has western obligations; Ahab’s ship has to be destroyed again. Changing Woman then turns into Melville’s Ishmael.

145 Cf. The Holy Bible, King James’s Version, Genesis 2, 8.15.22.
146 “He is naming everything.
   You are a microwave oven, Ahdamn tells the Elk.
   Nope, says that Elk. Try again.
   You are a garage sale, Ahdamn tells the Bear.
   We got to get you some glasses, says the Bear.” (41)
147 The Lone Ranger is based on Fran Striker’s radio serial and the famous TV-series in the 1950s. For further details see Flick “Reading Notes”, p. 141.
149 Cf. The Holy Bible, Genesis 8, 18-21.
151 “So, Changing Woman presses herself against that whale’s skin and she can feel those waves rock back and forth. Back and forth. Back and forth. This is nice, says Changing Woman.
   Yes, it is, says Moby-Jane. Wrap your arms and leg around me and hold on tight and we’ll really have some fun.
   It is marvelous fun, all right, that swimming and rolling and diving and sliding and spraying, and Changing Woman is beginning to enjoy being wet all the time.” (248)
The character of Thought Woman is taken from Pueblo tradition. She is told by A.A. Gabriel, who is of course an altered version of the archangel himself, that her name is Mary and that she has been chosen. He also tells her when and where she is going to have her baby. Thought Woman does not want to be told who she should be and whose baby she is going to have. In this respect, she is a little like Alberta. She leaves and later turns into Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe.

The last of the four women is Old Woman who originates probably in Blackfoot or Dunne-za tradition. Her encounter with ‘Young Man Walking on Water’ is marked by his egocentrism and her belief in community. He tries to rescue his followers (for whom he has not found the right name yet) from a boat caught in rough sea. While he shouts unsuccessfully at nature, Old Woman negotiates with the waves and the boat. She accuses ‘Young Man Walking On Water’ of acting as though he had “no relations” (390). One of the terms she actually suggests for his future disciples is “Subaltern” (389). Here the postcolonial discourse is clearly involved. Though Old Woman has saved the men on the boat, the Jesus-like character claims the fame for himself and points out that “[t]hat other person is a woman.” (390) Hence she has no right to perform important deeds. Old Woman later meets Nathaniel Bumppo, the “Post-Colonial Wilderness Guide and Outfitter” (433), who produces a whole list of stereotypical Indian characteristics. Old Woman suggests for the conclusion of his enumerations: “So […] Whites are superior and Indians are inferior.” (435) She later changes into Hawkeye from James Fenimore Cooper’s Leatherstocking books.

All four Women end up, disguised as literary personae at Fort Marion, the place Alberta’s lecture is about at the beginning of the novel. The mythical women convey the concept of “androgyny”. They are able to change and adapt to new situations but still stick to their traditions and values. For example First Woman says “mind your relations” (38). She clearly believes that certain ideals cannot be allowed to be forgotten. In this way they can be compared to Latisha, Alberta and Norma who in succeed living in a modern world minding their Blackfoot traditions.

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154 Cf. Schorecht, Storied Voices in Native American Texts, p. 54.
155 Cf. The Holy Bible, St. John 6, 16-20.
156 “Indians can run fast. Indians can endure pain. Indians have quick reflexes. Indians don’t talk much. Indians have good eyesight. Indians have agile bodies.” (434)
5.2 Other Women

Babo Jones has been working as a janitor at Dr. Hovaugh’s mental hospital for sixteen years.\(^\text{158}\) She is an Afro-American woman in her forties and she is a single mother, like Latisha, and earns her own living.

Babo introduces the problems of non-Native ethnic minorities in Canada. She thinks she is the one who understands the old Indians at the clinic best and sees that they are women in disguise. The Indians and Babo can communicate because they all belong to marginalized groups in Canadian society. In a way both groups can be classified as subaltern. Babo also enjoys the Indian tradition of storytelling “We’d trade stories” (56), she tells Sergeant Cereno in their interview.

Like Alberta she is confronted with prejudice and is discriminated against by members of the white majority culture due to her outer appearance. At the US/Canadian border Babo is even treated as an object when she is referred to as “personal property” (260).

Babo is another example of a strong woman who is proud of her traditions and does not let herself be subordinated by men.

Karen is Eli Stands Alone’s late wife. She only appears in Eli’s memories of her. She acts an example of a strong, positively depicted white woman. She is also an example of how intellectual white people deal with Native culture.

Karen has an extremely romanticised view of Native people in general but she is eager to learn more about them and is actually willing to overcome her stereotypical views. This might be one of the reasons why she also “liked the idea that Eli was Indian” (181). It is Karen who tries to make Eli accept his origins and return to his family on the reserve for a visit. When they actually go, they arrive in time for the Sun Dance. Karen is deeply impressed by the Native ceremony and is disappointed when they do not go to Blosson for the Sun Dance during the following years. When she recovers from a long illness (cancer), she and Eli plan to travel the world. Her answer to Eli’s question: “What do you want to do first?” is, not surprisingly, “The Sun Dance” (379). Eli gives in and Karen seems not only to have got what she wanted but also managed to bring Eli to face his cultural identity. It is a sad irony of fate that Karen dies in a car crash when the two of them are on their way to a farewell party their friends have organised for them before leaving for Blossom.

Though it takes Eli some more time to return home, Karen has always been the one who knew how important this return and the acceptance of his past would be for Eli’s quest for identity.

\(^{158}\) Her first name as well as her ancestry are borrowed from Herman Melville’s short story “Benito Cereno” in *Piazza Tales*. Lisa Karen Christie devotes a whole chapter of her Master’s thesis to the connection between of Melville’s short story and King’s Babo reference. For further details see Christie, *That Damn Whale*, pp. 58-79.
6. Conclusion

Throughout the novel the women seem to be “honoured for their intelligence, strength, personal autonomy and relationships with others.”

It can be said that all three Native female protagonists qualify as ‘changing women’. Furthermore, they show some of the characteristics, associated with the Blackfoot tradition of ninauposkitzipxe. The female characters teach the men the value of not denying their cultural roots but sticking to them. Especially in Latisha’s case it can be seen how the women not only adapt to new circumstances but make them work for them or change them creatively. The women know who they are and who they want to be. In the end, even Alberta has managed to make the close to impossible – or at least improbable – happen and is going to have a child without having to put up with a potential husband.

The women resist “white western patriarchal assumptions about culture and gender and suggest […] entirely different roles for women and a new paradigm for human relationships.”

This statement by McKay sums up the situation rather well. Though there are many colonial and postcolonial aspects in Green Grass, Running Water, like the rejection of mimicry, the novel also shows that the women generate their identity from sources that are not specific to the postcolonial discourse. The female characters cannot only be defined in their relation to colonialism and rejection of the modern western world. The importance of Blackfoot tradition is more than mere resistance. The high value the extended family has for all three women seems to be a universal theme especially in Native cultures. The female characters also gain strength by interacting with one another and supporting each other.

Though these findings are still far from founding a new theory on how to read Native literatures, they show that it is important not to stick too closely to a postcolonial approach either. The experience of having been colonised is, of course, part of the collective memory and thus a major part of cultural identity. There is nothing wrong with applying postcolonial thoughts to the analysis and partially it leads to interesting results that present a new aspect of the novel or show a known fact from a different angle. It is, however, vital that this theoretical framework does not cover the novel from all angles.

A combination of postcolonial theory and an awareness of important themes in Native tradition and the way Native identity is created should be used to gain a deeper understanding of Thomas King’s indigenous female characters. This is a plea for a plurality of theories and an open mind while reading any kind of literature. All art, of which literature is a part, contains the aspect of finding one’s identity to a certain extent. As identity is a very complex concept and is engendered by a multitude of factors, it seems to be unsatisfactory to limit the methods of analy-

159 McKay, ‘And that one takes a big bite of one of those nice red apples’, p. 2.
160 Ibid., p. vi.
sis to one or two leading theories. As well as applying different schools of literary theory there should also be an interdisciplinary angle. Psychology or Sociology might present interesting new ways of reading a certain character and thus might lead to astonishing new results. Especially when dealing with Native literature one should consider Native concepts in order to understand the text. As stated before, the western concept of gender is not the Native one. It would therefore oversimplify matters to say that King’s women are fighters for emancipation in a western sense of the word. On the other hand, the novel might well influence western female readers and encourage them in their struggle for equality. The reader is always part of the story as well and Thomas King definitely knows this and therefore probably plays with this idea too. The open-minded reader will always find it worthwhile to study King’s indigenous female characters as well as Green Grass, Running Water in general. As to definite answers one should perhaps consider Thomas King’s statement: “There are no truths […] Only stories” (432).
7. Bibliography

7.1 Primary Literature


7.2 Secondary Literature


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