

Humour and the Reality of Difference in *One Good Story, That One*

It would be difficult to approach any theme in Thomas King's writing without considering his use of humour. This is especially true when analysing King from the perspective of border studies, since Native stereotypes (which function as markers of intercultural difference and misunderstanding) are crucial to the comedic situations in his short stories. For example, in "Magpies," King uses the stereotype of Native technological inferiority to create humour by tricking his reader into seeing Native culture from an Eurocentric point of view. The same trick is present in "A Seat in the Garden," when Joe believes that three old Indians are homeless can-collectors when in fact they are simply good Samaritans on litter patrol. My goal in this essay is to affirm the ideas of critics of King who believe that his humour is meant to subvert stereotypes and breakdown borders between cultures and races. However, I also aim to take one step further in order to show how King reverts back to stereotypes and cultural assumptions in order to demonstrate how a limited amount of borders, in both the physical and metaphysical sense, are necessary for the cultural preservation and survival of indigenous cultures and, indeed, any marginalized group threatened by the dominant culture. When I use the term *dominant culture*, I refer specifically to the western, Eurocentric (in terms of historical influence rather than geography) culture that is, in one form, right-wing and highly xenophobic, and in another form, left-wing and highly accepting of marginalized races – not for the continuity of non-western cultures per se, but for the (very postmodern) impetus to create a borderless mass culture. By the conclusion of this essay, I hope to show how reading Thomas King can warn us about how the left-wing form of the dominant culture can be as assimilative as it is accepting.

It is not surprising to see a name like Thomas King appear in an article on border studies. Scholars are interested not only in his dual citizenship; they also point to his racially and

culturally diverse upbringing. King was born in California to a Cherokee father and a German-Greek mother. His father was (rather stereotypically) an army man and an alcoholic. It was his mother who raised King and his siblings and kept them in touch with their Native heritage. She brought them up in her beauty shop and took them on trips to visit the Cherokee in Oklahoma. In his collaborative book, *Border Crossings: Thomas King's Cultural Inversions*, Arnold Davidson describes King's childhood as involving "a continual movement between communities and across various racial and cultural boundaries" (4). This is likely why border analyses of King are not limited to his famous short story (simply titled "Borders").

With all this in mind, it is also not surprising, then, that critics have lauded King for his clever strategy of breaking down borders. Davidson, for example, appreciates how King "challenges the legitimacy of Eurocentric paradigms by installing a framework of Native beliefs and perspectives that reveal the absurdity of specific aspects of the former, from divergent viewpoints" (35). In order to give King's comedy its full due, Davidson draws on the writings of Barbara Babcock, who uses the term "symbolic inversion" to describe "any act of expressive behavior which inverts, contradicts, abrogates, or in some fashion presents an alternative to commonly held cultural codes, values, and norms, be they linguistic, literary or artistic, religious, or social and political" (14). Davidson, whose book on King has the words "Comic" or "Humour" in six out of seven chapter titles, views King's comedy as crucial to understanding the breakdown of borders. "Contradictions" and "incongruous juxtapositions" not only make readers laugh; they encourage readers to "explore alternative viewpoints and incorporate new roles and ideas" (35). It is Davidson's belief that King's comic inversions are not mere "replacements of Eurocentric perspectives with Native alternatives" (such as Adam and Eve with Ah-damn and Evening). Indeed, such thinking would contradict Davidson's general argument of Thomas

King's breakdown of borders. Instead, Davidson argues that "King's texts cultivate a sustained interaction between these conflicting perspectives, a strategy that conveys the complexities of being located 'in-between' non-Native and Native worlds" (36).

To give an example of the "in-between," Davidson points to the title story of *One Good Story, That One*, which retells the biblical tale of Genesis by turning Eve (renamed Evening) into a Native woman whose function in the story is to critique God and Adam (renamed Ah-damn). Davidson describes King's story in the following way: "Unlike Eve, Evening is not breaking a treaty (so to speak) with god, who has not told her that the tree is sacrosanct. She is hungry and she eats. Hence, in 'One Good Story, That One,' it is not Evening's desire but god's request that is disreputable" (57). In fact, the narrator of the story (who has been asked by anthropologists to tell a Native origin story) describes the garden as belonging to Eve more than god (King 6, 7). Davidson believes that "One Good Story, That One," "pluralizes" Genesis by "opening it to include people of different colours and genders" (60), thus breaking down various borders established by the (right-wing) dominant culture.

While Davidson approaches borders as though they are boundaries meant to be broken down, Jennifer Andrews and Priscilla Walton are more interested in borders as "contact zones" (601). Their article, "Rethinking Canadian and American Nationality: Indigeneity and the 49th Parallel in Thomas King," draws its inspiration from the work of Gloria E. Anzaldúa, who wrote on the U.S-Mexico border. Andrew and Walton posit that King's texts are demonstrative of how the traditional borders of the nation state contain "other nations, races, ethnicities, and cultures – such as those of First Nations peoples – divided by the traditional imperialist demarcations" (601). Andrews and Walton are therefore not necessarily against the existence of borders, although they do see it as a space to contest nationalist ideology.

While it's clear that Davidson takes a different approach to border studies from Andrews and Walton, they all reach a similar conclusion in their analysis of King's work. They discuss King's story, "Borders," which takes place on the 49th parallel and centers on a young boy and a stubborn mother who refuses to declare Canadian or American citizenship. The pair become stuck overnight between two countries and the mother tells the boy traditional Blackfoot stories about the stars (144). Andrews and Walton describe these stories as "counter-narratives" that work against the narratives of nation:

The mother's narratives undermine the authoritative narratives by raising questions about their primacy. Indeed, her storytelling, which occurs literally between the borders, functions within King's story as an appeal to understand the complex workings of borders and boundaries – what they admit, what they impede, and how they mediate what crosses or doesn't cross them in very different ways (609).

Much like Davidson (who used the word "pluralize" to describe border writing), Andrews and Walton see the border in Thomas King's writing as "complex," as subversive of the dominant nationalist ideology through its status as the home of various marginalized peoples.

If King, however, is truly the champion of the pluralization and complexity of borders, then how do we make sense of the irreconcilable cultural differences that pop up in the conclusions of his short stories? In "Magpies," for example, the narrator (the same narrator from "One Good Story, That One") tells a story about two siblings, Ambrose and Wilma (the former is a traditional Native, the latter is a Christian convert) at odds with one another on the question of how their mother, who the narrator names Granny, should be buried. When she was still alive,

Granny clearly stated her wish to be disposed of in the traditional Native way, as opposed to the dominant culture's method of hospitalization followed by burial (23). She instructs Ambrose to give her a proper Native death ritual, to which Ambrose replies (ironically, as we will soon discover), "You can count on me" (24). We soon learn that Ambrose is a chronic procrastinator who is "generous" with promises (26). The narrator describes Ambrose's unfulfilled promises: "I help you chop wood for winter, Ambrose tells my friend Napioa. Fix that truck for you, he says to Billy Frank. Going to dig that ditch tomorrow, he tells his uncle" (26). After several procrastinations, Ambrose digs Granny up from her grave and treats her corpse in the traditional way, by putting her into an animal skin which hangs off a tree. Wilma shows up, along with the RCMP, which exemplifies how indigenous cultural practices (in this case, death rituals) are both unacceptable and unlawful in the dominant culture. When the animal skin is inspected, the reader (along with the characters in the story) experience surprise when it is revealed that nothing is inside the skin except garbage. "Must be magic, says Ambrose..." Wilma and the RCMP officer return home and the story seems set to conclude with the stereotypical premise that magic must be the saviour of indigenous cultures in lieu of their technological inferiority to their Western colonizers. However, Ambrose steps back into the scene after everyone has left and says "My shovel broke... I'm going to get her tonight" (30).

For Davidson, Andrews and Walton, this is the classic stereotype subversion that destabilizes the border (in this story, the divide between Native and Christian) through humour. By shifting the focus of the story from a seemingly irresolvable discord between marginalized Native rituals and the dominant Christian culture to the universally human character flaw of Ambrose, King succeeds in attracting audiences from the dominant culture (termed "outsiders" by Davidson [60]) since they enjoy the joke as much as Native "insiders." Davidson, quite

rightly, sees comic situations like Ambrose's procrastination as the key to the non-polemical nature of King's otherwise highly charged political writing. "Rather than being merely corrective," writes Davidson, "King's comic writing also entertains readers and draws them into the text, encouraging active participation and enjoyment as Native stereotypes are pointedly debunked" (63).

Davidson is right to consider the outsider perspective in King's stories, but it is hard to argue that King is in favour of cultural integration when he actively re-establishes borders and Native stereotypes. In "Magpies," the story does not end with the revelation of Ambrose's character flaw. Instead, it ends with a return to Native magic. The narrator, an elder who provides Ambrose with various cultural teachings, warns Ambrose that the magpies will tell everyone about his plan to continue digging up granny with a new shovel. He tells Ambrose to sing a song so the magpies won't hear and won't remember what has transpired around the animal skin (30). In fact, the narrator blames the magpies for alerting Wilma and the RCMP about granny's body: "Boy, those birds are some fast talkers" (28). How does a reader who has little or no knowledge of Native cultures interpret the magpies? We know that King is attracting audiences from the dominant culture. It is important to remember, then, that from this outsider perspective, talking magpies hardly make sense. They would therefore be relegated to the realm of magic, to a space inaccessible to non-Native readers. In this way, the border between Native culture and the dominant culture becomes re-established. King's subversion and reversion of stereotypes is a sign that Native lifeways, ideas, and cultural histories have been marginalized and not taken seriously as an alternative to the dominant culture. In the case of "Magpies," a reversion to stereotypes is an act of empowerment and a message to the dominant culture that Native cultures are not meant to be fully understood or integrated into Western culture. This is

especially true when we consider how the conflict between Ambrose and his Christian sister Wilma remains unresolved. I see King's technique here as operating along the formula of stereotype subversion plus humour (which allows him to break borders and reach out to a broader audience of "outsiders") followed by stereotype reversion, which allows him to re-establish borders and therefore solidify Native culture as its own legitimate space outside of the dominant culture and immune from its criticism because the dominant culture simply cannot understand it.

To solidify my point, I wish to take a look at two other short stories which Davidson, Andrews and Walton did not mention in their writings: "A Seat in the Garden" and "Joe the Painter." In "A Seat in the Garden," the Native stereotypes are more obvious. The story centers on a bigoted white man named Joe and his friend Red, who is also white but not nearly as racist. They both see a "big Indian" in Joe's garden. This is the explicit plot of the story: Joe's struggle to remove the big Indian from his property. In order to do this, Joe consults three elderly Indians who wander through town on a regular basis. He believes they are homeless can collectors perpetually drunk off Lysol. King, as we might expect, subverts these stereotypes – the three Indians have homes and families, drink lemon water and not Lysol, and collect cans not for meagre income but as a service to remove garbage from the community. They tell Joe to build a bench in order to get rid of the big Indian. It is implied that only Joe and Red actually see the big Indian, especially when Red takes a picture of him, gets it developed, and discovers that no one is in the photo (96). Building the bench does nothing to remove the big Indian and the story ends with Joe and Red "sitting on the porch, drinking beer, and watching the Big Indian in the garden" (96). The third person narration shifts from Joe to Red, with the latter believing "with all his heart" that he had met the big Indian before (96).

In “A Seat in the Garden,” King does not subvert then revert stereotypes as he does in “Magpies” – the three Indians are clearly not what Joe initially made them out to be. Yet both stories end in the same way: with difference and a lack of understanding between Western and Native cultures. In “A Seat in the Garden,” this is best exemplified in the last few lines of dialogue. Joe confronts the three Indians after he builds the bench and fails to get rid of the big Indian:

“That Indian still in the cornfield?” said the second Indian.

“Of course he’s still there,” said Joe. “Can’t you hear him?”

“I don’t know,” said the third Indian, and he twisted the lid off the bottle and took a drink. “I don’t think he’s one of ours.”

“What should we do?”

“Don’t throw your cans in the hydrangea,” said the first Indian. “It’s hard to get them out. We’re not as young as we used to be.” (96)

The discrepancy between Joe’s question and the first Indian’s response is indicative of the borders between them. Joe is obviously expecting an answer that will help him remove the big Indian from his property. The three Indians’ role as environmentally conscious caretakers of the Earth is somewhat stereotypical but that is beside the point. Joe’s highly individual and western impetus to maintain only his own property is critiqued through the three Indians who hold typically Native values of caring for communal land more than private property. The fact that the Big Indian is an illusion that only Joe and Red can see is further proof of the estrangement between Native cultures and Western culture. Their assumptions of other cultures and their drive to act out against other cultures are based on the absurdity of their illusion. As a

result, their contact with the Indians demonstrates borders between Whites and Natives that are far more rigid than Davidson, Andrews and Walton would like to believe.

Borders also surround Joe in “Joe the Painter.” Though he turns out to be a friend of the Natives, Joe is overtly racist and has trouble seeing his Native friends beyond their stereotypes. He calls the narrator “chief” for no reason other than the fact that he is Indian and he constantly disparages the narrator for being dumb and illiterate not because the narrator is stupid, but because he himself lacks the patience to be heard. When the narrator’s relatives arrive to participate, under Joe’s leadership, in the town pageant competition, Joe exhibits his ignorance of contemporary indigenous cultures by saying that they all have crew cuts and they don’t look Indian enough (112). Despite Joe’s racism, the story concludes with the narrator saying “Everyone in town knew Joe. And all the people who knew Joe as well as I knew Joe didn’t like him. Except me. I like Joe” (120). Ironically, the story concludes by demonstrating how borders do not exist between the Natives and Joe. Instead, the mayor, who shied away from the historical reality of his town for the sake of political correctness, becomes the object of criticism. The mayor decides that Joe’s pageant entry of the Deer Island Massacre – which was essentially a genocidal campaign led by the town’s founder to rid the land of Natives – was too inappropriate to win the competition. Thus, metaphysical borders are erected between the town’s government and its native inhabitants due to the government’s unwillingness to recognize its troublesome past. Ironically, it is Joe’s racism and adherence to Native stereotypes that reveals the borders created by political correctness. In “Joe the Painter,” the Eurocentric “outsider” audience functions much as it does in “Magpies.” They share in the humour of Joe’s outward racism, knowing that his political incorrectness is unacceptable. And yet, for this very reason, they are complicit in the mayor’s failure to acknowledge the highly offensive reality of the town’s

origins. King has essentially created a catch-22 for his outsider audience. They cannot be politically incorrect because that is racist. Nor can they be dismissive of the reality of brutal historical injustices against Native peoples. Following Davidson's idea that members of the dominant culture are invited to "participate" in the text, it becomes apparent that outsiders can pick only one of two stances: to be right wing and politically incorrect, or to be left-wing and integrative to the point of wilful ignorance of cultural differences. Thus King raises borders between marginalized Native cultures and readers who belong to the dominant culture.

The conclusion of "Joe the Painter" suggests that King prefers his outsider readers to avoid the leftist ideal of integrating cultures by erasing borders. He would rather have an outward racist who does not fully understand Native cultures but does understand the political-historical realities that separate Natives from the dominant culture. However, this does not necessarily imply that King is a segregationist or racist himself. Davidson, Andrews and Walton all (much too briefly) point to the danger of border breakdown between dominant and marginalized cultures. Davidson points to King's novel, *Green Grass, Running Water*, for its "postmodern metacritique" (74). Through the character of Eli, Davidson argues that the novel "affirms the necessity of maintaining some crucial borders, including the lines that designate reserve lands" (74). Davidson suggests that postmodernism's preoccupation with pluralism and the breakdown of borders is potentially dangerous for marginalized groups. "Postmodern models," writes Davidson, "though seemingly generous and egalitarian, often cultivate 'indifference' or complete ignorance of those borders and boundaries that actually protect and sustain otherwise marginalized populations" (74). Andrews and Walton also make note of the dangers of postmodernism: "Because to erase all borders is to threaten the viability of First Nations' claims to land and natural resources, King's narratives constantly seek a balance between extremes,

without sacrificing the forcefulness of Native political resistance” (606). Although Davidson, Andrews and Walton do not hesitate to warn their readers about the borderless world that postmodernism imagines, they treat the danger of the assimilation of marginalized cultures far too lightly. It is no more than an afterthought to the three of them. Moreover, they limit their critique of postmodern border breakdown to the physical realm, citing the threat it poses to traditional Native reserve lands. By analysing the reconstruction of racial and cultural barriers in the conclusions of short stories like “Magpies,” “A Seat in the Garden,” and “Joe the Painter,” it becomes clear that King’s concerns about the breakdown of borders go far beyond the physical realm. Perhaps Joe the Painter is the best (albeit the most hyperbolized) example of what King expects from his outsider audience. Joe doesn’t understand Native culture when Native people don’t act according to their stereotypes and he doesn’t understand Native culture when Native people accept their own stereotypes, as they do in the pageant when they “sing real loud and whoop and jump around on the sand” like savages (King 117). He does, however, understand that Native people are different, and that they deserve the right to have their story told free of interference from the dominant culture – even if that culture is polite.

Works Cited

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