King and his critics: indigenous versus non-indigenous commentary on green grass,...

There are marked differences between the critiques of Thomas King's novel Green Grass Running Water which were written for an Indigenous audience and those which were not. The main differences are in the focus and worldview of the critiques. Those which were written for Indigenous magazine articles focus on the power of stories, re-visioning the systematic oppression of Aboriginal people, and the assumption of superiority by colonizing cultures. The critiques which were written for the non-Indigenous audience focus on the environmental impact, and politics, of colonial culture, as well as discuss the oral and written traditions as if they were diametrically opposed to one another.

The critique by James Cox, which is printed in American Indian Quarterly, emphasizes the ideas of annihilation, conquest, and the survival of Native Americans. He writes that " one of the major components of European and European North American storytelling traditions about colonialism is the plot that culminates in a conquest of the Americas...[and that] the authors of these stories frequently create Native characters in order to annihilate them in their imaginations and in the texts". Not only do these European authors create characters to annihilate but they also " enable the belief that white people have a manifest destiny to own the land and plan its future". When writing for an Indigenous audience the power of storytelling is taken for granted and the idea of re-writing history as a way of re-visioning is deemed empowering. Cox writes that " Thomas King, for example, incorporates his critique into his story with intensive revisions and subversions of narratives that plot a Native American absence...[he]repopulates their stories with First Nations characters whose presence replots doom as survival of, and

resistance to, colonial violence and domination". This attitude towards the re-visioning of European stories is in stark contrast to Sharon Bailey's point of view. She writes in World Literature Today that King is merely " pointing out errors in the written stories", that he is " poking fun at what becomes the inflexibility of written text and the superiority of the more plastic oral storytelling technique," concluding that there is a " war of written versus oral words". By using terms such as " war" and " superiority" Bailey encourages an " Us versus Them" dichotomy. This kind of thinking is typical in the Anglo-western world view. The main thrust of her critique focuses on the written word versus the oral tradition. She writes as if she is deeply offended by King's " [lampooning of] the non-Native icons of culture". She argues that King's novel " undermines" English/Canadian/Anglo-American ideas of truth and reality and that not only is " authority sabotaged" but that the " attack ...takes on a truly ludicrous edge" as the narrator " mistreats" more tangential Christian beliefs. Bailey does not move past the argument between written word versus oral tradition. She does not read deeper into the reasons why King writes in this way nor she does not view it from an aboriginal perspective.

While Cox emphasizes the idea of the annihilation of aboriginal people and the Europeans idea that it is their manifest destiny to rule the world as supported by their written words, Cheryl Lousley, writing in Essays on Canadian Writing says " King's comic approach to environmental politics can be read as a vision of radical democracy grounded in a commitment to justice, pluralism, and respect for one's relations, human and nonhuman". She extends the blanket of oppression past Indigenous peoples to also cover

all people, animals, plants and the Earth. Her main focus is about environmental politics, mastery over nature as a metaphor, and " the novel's playfully open-ended and dialogic narrative structure ...as an effort in green radical democracy". Lousley, by emphasizing the environmental aspects, broadens the idea of oppression from a purely race-based view to one which encompasses a wider point of view. She is including all peoples when she writes that " King underscores how all our actions and ambitions take place within an unpredictable, more-than-human world that we must approach with suitable respect...[and that] dams, cars, and scientific hubris are all aspects of the same development mind-set. Interestingly, in a 1993 interview with Jace Weaver, King says, " I really don't care about the white audience). They don't have an understanding of the intricacies of Native life, and I don't think they're much interested in it, quite frankly" (qtd. in Weaver 56). So although some critics wish to extend King's message to cover all humans I think his intention is that the message be kept firmly inside an Indigenous framework of reference.

Whereas Lousley wants to extend King's novel to cover everybody, Carlton Smith, writing for American Indian Quarterly, brings his focus very narrowly down to the " post- modern trickster" and the importance of the trickster as a " linguistic construct sent forth to disrupt our acceptance of certain " old stories"–stories that collude in the oppression of Native Americans". He brings his critique back to the personal and connects with the characters in the story. He narrows the focus and puts the attention on " King's Blackfoot community [and how] stories voiced among friends thus hold the potential to intervene in a powerful way in the " writing" of their lives". Throughout

Smith’s critique maintaining the Native perspective is the focus along with recognizing the pressure of “ fixed narratives”, the “ poisoning” power of words and stories, as well as “ the value of community and stories in imagining new possibilities for tradition”.

The main difference between those authors who are writing for Indigenous audiences and those who are not is that the Indigenous authors not only keep the attention and focus on the oppression of Aboriginal peoples but they also emphasize the very survival of their people. The non- Indigenous articles are more cerebral and less impassioned. The tone is much less immediate, less dynamic, and less personal. They approach the novel from an outsider’s perspective, either trying to fit into it and make it their own or trying to fight with it and figure out who is right and who is wrong. These four articles are a testament to the importance of acknowledging that a critique is a personal response to a text and that one must read many critiques to start to understand the depth of a piece of writing. There have been many critiques written about this novel and one can only assume there will be many more in the future each from the author’s own response to the work and personal perspective.

Works Cited

Bailey, Sharon M. “ The Arbitrary Nature of the Story: Poking Fun at Oral and Written Authority in Thomas King’s ‘ Green Grass, Running Water’ In: World Literature Today, 1/1/1999, Vol. 73, Issue 1, p. 43-52; University of Oklahoma Language: English, Database: JSTOR Journals

Cox, James H. “ All This Water Imagery Must Mean Something”: Thomas King’s Revisions of Narratives of Domination and Conquest in “ Green Grass, Running Water.” American Indian Quarterly. Spring 2000, Vol. 24 Issue 2, p 219-246. 28p.

Lousley, Cheryl.” Hosanna Da, Our Home on Natives’ Land”: Environmental Justice and Democracy in Thomas King’s “ Green Grass, Running Water.” Essays on Canadian Writing. Winter 2004, Issue 81, p17-44. 28p.

Rodness, Roshaya .” Thomas King’s National Literary Celebrity and the Cultural Ambassadorship of a Native Canadian Writer” Canadian Literature. Spring 2014, Issue 220, p55-72. 18p

Smith, Carlton.” Coyote, Contingency, and Community: Thomas King’s “ Green Grass, Running Water” and Postmodern Trickster. American Indian Quarterly. Summer 98, Vol. 21 Issue 3, p 515-534. 20p.