In Memoriam
Anna Rutherford
1932 – 2001

Compr(om)ising Post/colonialism(s)

Challenging Narratives and Practices

edited by

Greg Ratcliffe
and
Gerry Turcotte

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William Strutt's "Black Troopers Escorting a Prisoner From Balarat to Melbourne, 1851". Reproduced with the permission of the Library Committee of the Parliament of Victoria from William Strutt's *Victoria the Golden: Scenes, Sketches and Jottings from Nature, 1850–1862.*

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Contents

Introduction

Greg Ratcliffe and Gerry Turcotte — Riddling Postcolonialisms: Challenging Narratives and Practices — 7

I. Postcolonial Futures

Diana Brydon — Compromising Postcolonialisms: Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen* and Contemporary Postcolonial Debates — 15

Helen Tiffin — Unjust Relations: Post-Colonialism and the Species Boundary — 30

II. Problematic Practices

Paul Sharrad — "Signs Taken for Blunders": or No Question about Ambivalence or Authority in a Washbasket in Brittany, March 1988 — 45

Penny van Toorn — Institutional Structures and Individual Agency: Writing With, About, and To Aboriginal Authors — 55

Juliana Nfah-Abbenyi — "Na Weti Dat?" Interrogating the Traffic in Post-colonialism(s) — 64

III. Marking Canadian Identities

Wendy Pearson — "An Odd National Entity": Duplicity, Postcolonialism and the Queerness of Being Canadian — 77

IV. The Politics of Indigenous Identities

Pam Johnston — Reality Collisions: Social Justice Vs Post-Colonialism — 97

Terry Goldie — "Who is Mudrooroo?" — 105

Hanna Jaireth — Human Rights Discourse and Political Agency: A Constructivist Exploration — 114

V. Constructing "Different" Identities

Hart Cohen — The Filmworks of T.G.H. Strehlow: Commodities of the Sacred — 129

Shane Hersey — Thinking the Unthinkable: The Imaginary White Savage of T.G.H. Strehlow — 139

Compromising Postcolonialisms: Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen* and Contemporary Postcolonial Debates

Diana Brydon

Tomson Highway's new novel, *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, encapsulates in its title image the twisted sorrows, betrayals, visions, and desires that form the Cree and Canadian colonial legacy, still working its destruction in Canada today. Thomas King's new novel, *Truth and Bright Water*, shows the sadness of the past seeping into the present. Neither violence, dreams, nor symbolic gestures seem capable of enabling his contemporary native protagonists to discover productive forms of agency. Can these stories help ground contemporary postcolonial debates within a Canadian context? These are two writers known for their popular comic tropings on serious themes. Both have quickly moved into a mainstream acceptance that prompts consideration of the containment strategies operating in the Canadian cultural industry today.

After the enormous success of Highway's plays, *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips Oughta Move from Kapuskasing*, a success marked by *Dry Lips*' move from the alternative theatre setting of Theatre Passe Muraille to the mainstream Royal Alex, any new work by Highway is assured extensive media attention. In addition to the widespread success of King's *Medicine River* (made into a television film) and *Green Grass, Running Water*, King may be best known for the popular CBC radio show, *The Dead Dog Café*. Each addresses his work to a culturally mixed audience, taking care to make non-native readers, viewers or listeners feel included. Because the humour of Highway and King has made white audiences laugh, moving them into mainstream acceptance, each writer has had his political effectiveness questioned. And perhaps not coincidentally, each has turned to darker visions in these recent texts, but without abandoning the ludic play that signals survival and the triumph of a perspective that refuses to be silenced. These books give me hope while continuing to sober me with the immensity of the challenges still before Canadians if we wish to create an equitable society out of a bitter colonial past.

I see contemporary native literature as implicitly in dialogue with postcolonial theories: it is not subsumed by them but it is not entirely outside them either. While many native writers see postcolonialism as another Western construct engaged with Western concerns, many also believe that the politics of colonisation and colonial legacies need to be addressed. These questions of

address and redress cannot be separated. I do not think it is possible to stand outside the contemporary questions that postcolonial theory raises, although many critics try to position themselves outside them, on the apparently firmer ground of a materialist critique that sees postcolonial theory as hopelessly tainted by its interactions with postmodernist theories or with what Donald Morton terms "the Ludic Left" (189). In its search for positions outside these disabling binaries opposing materialist to textualist analysis, and serious social concerns against ludic celebrations of human ingenuity, postcolonial theory can seem amorphous and contradictory. E. San Juan Jr, in *Beyond Postcolonial Theory*, argues that postcolonial theory has become primarily the territory of settler-invader imaginations wishing to claim an oppression that belongs to others. Laura Chrisman and Patrick Williams, in *Colonial Discourse and Post/Colonial Theory*, agree that settler colonies should be excluded from postcolonial theory but see them as playing a minor and discredited role within the field. Ania Loomba, in *Colonialism/Postcolonialism,* proceeds as if her topic were chiefly concerned with Indian and African colonialisms. In recent interviews, Edward Said (*Interventions*) and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Papastergiadis) disown the label, although they are often credited with having founded the field.

Postcolonial theory, as developed by Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak, is obsessed by its own compromises and contaminations, yet as the field unfolds, a trend toward establishing a pure identity for the field through expelling "impure" elements is gaining ground. Targets for expulsion include settler colonies and the anti-foundationalist theories of experience, subject formation, and representation, analysed through deconstructive linguistic and literary studies and often associated with postmodernism. Current postcolonial debates are shifting the terrain of postcolonial study away from the literary, with its insistence on contradiction and complexity, and away from settler colonial concerns with ambivalent colonialisms. I see a link between these twin rejections, based on the problem of how critics position themselves in relation to compromise.

This paper tries to work through the problem of compromised and compromising postcolonialisms through demarcating how the problem is articulated in three interrelated sites: 1. theoretical debate; 2. literary criticism, in which I will provide a postcolonially-inflected reading of Highway's novel; and 3. institutional contexts. I will be arguing for acceptance of postcolonial literary critique as a partial, provisional, and imperfect approach that nonetheless allows pressing questions to be asked about the relations of text and world, the limits of disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity; and the multiple contexts in which postcolonial critics conduct their work. Finally, I will be urging literary critics to value as well as question the cultural work that textual readings may perform, while remaining alert to potential slippages between co-option and compromise. In making this argument, I align myself with the larger cultural project articulated by Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd in *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital*, where they argue for a "differently conceived 'politics of culture'" (26).

1. Theoretical Debate

Many current theorists of the postcolonial reject both the label of postcolonialism and the impotence of an analysis perceived to be divorced from direct intervention in public affairs. A renewed resistance theory, where the stakes seem clear, is challenging postcolonial readings exploring the potential of compromise. Critics of postcolonialism such as Aijaz Ahmad, Arif Dirlik, E. San Juan Jr, and Ella Shohat argue in various ways for what amounts to a return to the Manichean binaries of oppressor and oppressed, the academy and the world. In *Beyond Postcolonial Theory*, San Juan Jr rejects what he terms the "ludic, performative postcolonialism obsessed with dismantling the intelligibility of Western modernity" when it should be addressing social inequities through Marxist analysis and the support of revolutionary movements (276). I do not wish to disparage the valuable and varied contributions these critics have made to the development of the postcolonial field over many years. Their work is important and deserves attention. Yet many of these critics seem to be assuming a limited view of the literary and its cultural and material work. To make their arguments for the political, they essentialise the literary as non-worldly and immaterial and dismiss the ludic as thoroughly complicit in the production of capitalist commodifications. I find such characterisations only partially accurate and therefore inadequate for both theoretical and practical purposes.

At the same time, it is important to understand the larger global context in which these critiques emerge. The *Sub/Stance* Call for Papers for a conference to be held at the University of Western Ontario in October 1999 points out that "the end of the Cold War has moved us into a new colonial era in which virtually any resistance to a capitalist consensus amongst ruling elites is relegated to the margins" (UWO/*Sub/Stance*: "The Passage of Literary and Cultural Criticism"). As capitalism grows increasingly dominant, the capacity to name its power is diminishing. A *New York Times* article from January 23 notes that economists have "squeezed out the word capitalism, the once traditional name for the market system, with its subjective connotation of class struggle between owners or managers and workers and with its suggestion of the privileges that go with various levels of wealth. The word capitalism no longer appears in popular textbooks for Economics 101" (Uchitelle, 2). The renewed insistence on enlarging the space for critiques of capitalism within postcolonial debates must be seen in the context of their displacement from economic debates and their erasure from the wider public sphere. Since the end of the Cold War, oppression and privilege have moved from being understood as objective descriptors to being seen as subjective "experiences". These experiences have been reclassified from the public to the private domain. They then become reportable in fictional form without being available for social or economic redress. As capitalism is being naturalised into economics

as such, it becomes correspondingly more urgent for postcolonial theorists to understand that naturalisation and its global effects.

There is a historical conjunction of forces in operation here that postcolonial thinkers need to address. In such a context, postcolonial narratives of cultural difference that once seemed progressive may be remobilised to reinforce colonialist notions of cultural superiority, elitist privilege, and racist practices. As Sherene Razack points out in *Looking White People in the Eye*, culturalist narratives may be used to contain and defuse feminist and antiracist activities. That does not mean such narratives should be abandoned; but they do need to be interrogated and situated. Donald Morton points out similar problems with the deployment of queer narratives. I think there is a need to develop forms of literary criticism attuned to the operation of economic and political forces that may still concentrate attention on the literary and the ludic, not simply to dismiss them as complicit constructions but to consider the full range of their effects.

Postcolonial theories draw on the strengths of many disciplines. The discipline of English has its own contributions to make to the development of the field. As Len Findlay so persuasively argues, "the strengths of the discipline of English must be reassessed and built upon rather than impulsively discarded" (9). Here the ludic, slippery as it is, may prove an ally. Writers as politically opposed as Alexander Pope and Lenny Bruce have understood that to be serious, people do not need to be solemn. Humour can spring from great hurt and great guilt, bringing settler descendant and native people ambiguously together. At the same time, I am deeply troubled by the ways in which native humour is currently represented by Canadian media and often received by white audiences as a de-politicising rather than a re-politicising of the ways Canadians understand oppression. For native audiences, humour can provide a healing and bonding experience; for white audiences, it can reconfirm stereotypes and provide an absolution from guilt. Literary critics have the analytical tools to push thinking beyond such clichés but we have not been successful in reaching audiences beyond our classrooms with our complicating perspectives.

Instead, postcolonial literary theory is charged with being a hopelessly compromised construction, which sometimes fortifies the very structures it seeks to topple. Settler culture studies, such as the Canadian, are seen as especially suspect. Such analyses must force the literary critic to re-examine the cultural work that postcolonial literary studies currently performs. These critiques identify genuine injustices that cry out for remedies. They express an understandable impatience. The liberation movements of the 1950s and '60s have not led to the decolonisations they promised. Neither have the self-identified subversions of postcolonial literary readings led to identifiable social improvements. Postcolonial critics need to examine both legacies for their strengths and weaknesses.

This is part of the task I have set myself in my current research project funded by SSHRC. In *Postcolonialism: The Critical Heritage*, a research anthology to be published by Routledge, I am compiling a four volume, multi-disciplinary anthology of the key documents in the history of postcolonialism as a critical concept. By establishing a critical archive of crucial writings from a variety of disciplines and geographical locations, the project allows me to intervene in current disputes over the shaping and future directions of the field: a huge responsibility. I want to encourage cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural thinking in postcolonial analysis and I hope to provide a more nuanced access to its history than has previously been available. This is a historically-oriented project. I am not commissioning new work, but reproducing earlier work, much of which has been neglected since Said's *Orientalism* revived interest in the field.

In designing the categories that arrange the diverse contributory streams that comprise this ocean of postcolonial theory, I have deliberately avoided setting up categories that might be seen to confirm an identity-based politics in favour of thinking through category constructions and their crossings. I did not want to categorise essays according to the racial, gendered or political identity of the author but rather in terms of the issues the writers addressed. Therefore, contributions by Canadian First Nations writers may be found in several categories, in sections on "colonial discourse" and "gender analysis" as well as in "internal colonisations", where they might more stereotypically be placed. I hope that this anthology can question some of those stereotypes while contributing in a positive way to the continuation of productive postcolonial debates around these and other issues. There are anthologies that record the indigenous voice or that document the specific concerns of different colonised groups. A postcolonial anthology, by definition, should destabilise the categories of nation, race, ethnicity, and gender, demonstrating that these categories carry histories of contestation over their construction and mobilisation. This is clearly one of the strategies of postcolonial practices that most troubles critics such as San Juan Jr and Morton, who see stable identity formations as essential for achieving political agency. In contrast, I believe that coalitional politics based on a shared identification of interests within a specific social context stand a greater chance of promoting agency.

To ensure that Fourth World politics are not forgotten as politics, I have created the category, "Declarations and Manifestos", where key political and cultural collective statements, such as the Dene Declaration, are reproduced. In constructing my categories to challenge foundationalist assumptions about identity and to highlight category crossings, I am trying to give readers access to history as a contested and complicated terrain whose contours shift as the angle of approach changes.

Those who think we should move "beyond postcolonialism" without looking to history to see how the field has developed through diverse streams of inquiry may find fault with this anthology. Some will see too many early

Marxist documents, too much work by political activists and not enough by creative writers; others will see far too much attention paid to culture and academic disciplinary formations. My goal throughout has been to show the potential of dialogue across disciplinary formations, to demonstrate a continuity of concern and a range of address that can potentially link those who focus on economic issues in alliance with those who choose to focus attention on the literary.

2. Literary Expression

Literary texts describe the compromised positions and the enabling compromises that complicate any speaking of truth to power — Said's well-known formulation of the intellectual's role. Jamaican writer Erna Brodber's "spirit thieves" in *Myal* have their counterpart in the *Weetigo* of Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen*. Highway's *Kiss* narrates Northern Manitoba Cree experience of colonial encounters through images particular to his own people, place and time: Canada from 1951 to 1987, from Cold War to the end of the Cold War.

Highway's stories help me illustrate the inter-animating challenges of Canadian and postcolonial studies. The congratulatory kiss bestowed by the white Beauty Pageant Fur Queen on Abraham Okimasis, caribou hunter and winner of the 1951 Millington Cup World Championship Dog Derby at the Trappers' Festival, Oopaskooyak, Manitoba, sets the plot in motion and initiates the novel's complex interplay across different realms of spiritual and cultural experience. The Fur Queen greets Abraham after his death and ushers his beloved youngest son beyond the threshold of death at the novel's heart-rending conclusion. The first kiss is immortalised in the oral storytelling traditions of the Okimasis family and imaged in their only photograph. The Fur Queen presides over the birth of two sons Jeremiah, called Champion in Cree, and Gabriel, called Dancer. Jeremiah is the prophet of doom; Gabriel the angel of annunciation. Jeremiah the survivor; Gabriel the sacrificial victim. In the narrator's telling, the Fur Queen is indigenised and transformed into a trickster deity who is also a kind of personal *manitou* presiding over the young boys' conceptions, birth journeys, and subsequent adventures. She is there as they are initiated into the hypocrisies of a Christian religion that allows its priests to separate a doctrine of asceticism from their indulgence of an illicit desire for the flesh of little boys. Through her presence she seems to shield them from total destruction by the white man's religion, which is characterised as a potent mix of Christianity, irresponsible lust, and consumer capitalism.

Highway's title echoes Manuel Puig's *Kiss of the Spider Woman* and Hans Christian Anderson's fable of the Snow Queen. Behind the label "Queen" lurks the imperial legacy of the British monarchy and the queer camp parody performed by a cross-dressed "Queen". As a manifestation of Trickster, Highway's Fur Queen performs kiss, smile, laugh, and wink as double-edged enactments of promise and betrayal. She incorporates the pain and pleasure

of desire. Her enigmatic presence in the heavens above ensures continuity and survival through adaptation and operates to remind the reader of alternative spiritual dimensions.

For Gabriel, she is Trickster assuming the form of the European "*belle dame sans merci*", a form embodying the masochistic desire he learned in the residential school. On his deathbed, Gabriel longs to go to her instead of to the humourless and sexless Christian God. As he dies, he sees "a young woman so fair her skin looked chiselled from arctic frost, her teeth pearls of ice, lips streaks of blood, the eyes white flames in a pitch-black night" (305). This is a complicated moment. The Fur Queen looks like a vampire, embodying the threat of a white culture maintaining its vitality through sucking the blood of the colonised, yet she is also presented here as the force conjured by the native death rituals performed inside the room while the Christian priest is kept locked outside. As she sweeps into the room and bends to kiss Gabriel, he wants the moment to last for a thousand years. The final sentence of the novel describes their exit: "Rising from his body, Gabriel Okimasis and the Fur Queen floated off into the swirling mist, as the little white fox on the collar of the cape turned to Jeremiah. And winked" (306).

The wink: an invitation to complicity, an ironic acknowledgment of doubleness. The priest and his God have been outwitted. Cree perspectives survive, but in reconstituted and ambiguous forms. Fully unpacking the Fur Queen's hybridity will take some thorough analysis drawing on the combined insights of native, postcolonial, queer, psychoanalytical, materialist, and critical race theories. For a start, the novel seems to place the Fur Queen firmly in the native tradition of Trickster discourses of cultural adaptation. But the specifics of her Trickster play are complex.

As Julia Emberley demonstrates in *The Cultural Politics of Fur*, both sexual and material excess characterise the symbolic power of fur. By the end of the nineteenth century and especially in Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's *Venus in Furs*, "the figure of the fur-clad feminine despot emerged as a bearer of an imperialist sexualised violence" (Emberley, 11). It is this symbolic power in all its ambivalence that Highway appropriates for his Trickster Queen. Donald Morton's analysis in "Queerity and Ludic Sado-Masochism: Compulsory Consumption and the Emerging Post-al Queer", seems apposite but insufficient for advancing understanding of this moment. The Fur Queen invokes a complicated masochism intimately connected to the bodily and spiritual ravages of colonialism, the consuming passions of consumerism, and the complicated politics of same sex desire within and across boundaries constructed on the basis of race. Whereas Gabriel appears to immerse himself in the ambivalent torments first aroused by the sexual abuse endured in the school at the hands of the priests, Jeremiah projects his complicated emotional reaction onto his construction of the Queen. Her power to remain above the abuse, icily impervious to approach or penetration, symbolically counters that of the crucified Christ, whose presence on the crucifix around the priest's

neck, seems to endorse, as it participates in, the abuse. To Jeremiah and Gabriel alike the crucifix and later the mall are the contemporary forms taken by the voracious *Weetigo*, presented by Highway's narrative as the cannibalistic enemy of ordinary pre-capitalist, pre-colonial peoples who knew how to find joy in fellowship and community, through maintaining the values of humility and respect and through isolating the antisocial urges of *Weetigo*. In eventually consuming Gabriel, the *Weetigo* leaves Jeremiah, and the reader, emptied of emotion, and drained by the tragedy performed in the name of colonialism.

Highway's use of *Weetigo* symbolism recalls Jack Forbes' invocation of this traditional native cannibal figure to define what he terms in the subtitle of his study, *Columbus and Other Cannibals*, "the '*Wetiko*' Disease of Exploitation, Imperialism and Terrorism". Forbes argues that "the *wetiko* psychosis is a very contagious and rapidly spreading disease" (55) that is spread by almost every cultural text and institution in contemporary American society, including those that seek, through the adoption of *wetiko* behaviour, to resist its dominance. Because Forbes believes that "colonialism is maintained by means of properly-controlled *wetiko* behaviour" (87), he identifies spiritual regeneration through a return to the "good, red road" (137) as the only cure for this disease. In *Cannibal Culture: Art, Appropriation, and the Commodification of Difference*, Deborah Root draws on Forbes' analysis to suggest that he uses the *wetiko* concept less as a metaphor than "as a technical medico-spiritual term for a particular approach to the world" (11). Understanding *wetiko* psychosis as a description of how "the state both produces and consumes fear" (12), Root analyses how "contemporary society has aestheticised *wetiko* sickness" (13) so that most North Americans are rendered cannibal in this sense. It is this recognition of the aestheticising and eroticising of "cannibal culture" that most closely links Puig's presentation of the Spider Woman to Highway's of the Fur Queen.

Like Puig's novel, Highway's *Kiss* traces the complicated intersections of personal and political, same sex desire, complicity and guilt. Within a context of incarceration — prison cell in *Spider Woman* and residential school in *Fur Queen* — the brothers learn the power of dreams and the resilience of their humanity. But Highway's novel is further complicated by its interaction with other generic traditions. The cultural gaze invoked by the popular North American captivity narrative tradition is reversed to present the native captive's perspective on an abducting white society. And the doubled narrative of Puig's text that intertwines the stories of revolutionary and dreamer to undermine the privileging of one role above the other is repeated, with a twist, in Highway's novel. Jeremiah/Champion the singer and pianist, and Gabriel the dancer might seem to privilege the bias of the narrative away from the political to the cultural spheres. Yet the novel suggests that such binaries need to be rethought. The history of the Hudson Bay Company as one of the world's first transnational corporations and the role of the fur trade in the conquest of Canada haunt the story of Abraham the Cree hunter and the Fur Queen. The years that Jeremiah spends on the streets of Winnipeg trying to help his people dramatise

the full horror and violence of an internal colonialism that continues to maim, distort, and kill its victims. These scenes invoke specific turning points in Canada's history of colonial shame, such as the long unpunished murder of Helen Betty Osborne.[1] Both Jeremiah and Gabriel refunction this history through their art.

The cover of the novel reproduces a photograph of Tomson Highway's dancer brother René, elegantly posed in a manner reminiscent of the *manitous* who grace the cover of Basil Johnston's study of these complex mythological figures. Such a cover invites an autobiographical reading linking Tomson Highway's grief over his brother's premature death with Jeremiah's grief in the novel. In interviews, Highway both invites and deflects such readings, insisting that the novel must be read as a complex engagement with personal and social history, an engagement that locates the personal experience within a specific colonial context, and that seeks to carry the force of that personal anguish back into the public sphere to find appropriate forms of redress and progress.

Invoked cautiously, trauma theory may help here. Instead of using the Holocaust as the defining sign of all genocidal history, postcolonial theory tries to recognise and distinguish the range of genocidal narratives that mark human history, from the occupation of the Americas to the Holocaust, Cambodia, and beyond. Highway's novel invites a reading in terms of survivor's guilt that positions differently situated readers according to their relation to the history he tells. Native and non-Native readers experience differential access to power, differentially complicated relations to agency, and different expectations about how Canada's history of colonialism may be translated into the emotional range of fiction. These differences will inflect how this novel gets read, even when read through an apparently similar lens that focuses on the problem of survivor's guilt. Highway's brother is dead. (And dead of AIDS, that "most postcolonial of diseases", according to Samuel R. Delany [207]). Yet there is a narrative logic beyond that of the author's personal experience in the structure of the novel.

Why must the move toward the future be built on the death of the brother? Could it be, as Wole Soyinka seems to argue, that the full tragedy of colonialism can only be expressed through the genre of tragedy, of catharsis through the scapegoat? And if so, are contemporary postcolonial debates instinctively seeking their own scapegoat figures, on whose deaths they may build a symbolic resurrection? To exclude the settler colony may be to kill reminders of complicity. To deny full scope to the literary, with its ambiguities, equivocations, complications and contradictions, may be to deceive oneself into believing that solutions can be reached without compromise. To imagine that identity can be secured through a single attachment may help ward off the kind of pain one must endure to read a book like Highway's and still return the fox's wink at the very moment of deepest loss. Highway's *Fur Queen* begins to teach receptive readers the power of such gestures. The wink

marks a conclusion that is also a beginning. And it is the gesture of the trickster, the compromised compromiser, a type of culture-hero incomprehensible to the Manichean imagination.

In the middle of the novel, and at the heart of their story, the Cree brothers enter the Polo Park Shopping Mall to buy Gabriel new clothes for the city. Jeremiah recalls Aunt Black-Eyed Susan's story of the weasel's new fur coat, hoping that "A sudden swerve to Cree mythology might disarm" his sense that occult phenomena lurk within the mall. Despite his unease, Jeremiah explodes with laughter as they recall the bawdy details of the tale. "You could never get away with a story like that in English" (118), Jeremiah muses, as Highway proceeds to do just that.

As they enter "the belly of the beast" (119), the boys' journey through the mall seems to parallel Weesageechak's journey. Disguised as a weasel, the trickster enters the *Weetigo*'s bumhole to destroy the monster from within, chewing "his entrails to smithereens from the inside out" (120). Two later scenes reverse these dynamics. Here, the monster lives inside the boys' guts, gnawing their innards (252), using the internalised self-hatred taught by the imperial church to devour them alive. Clothed in the "white fur coat" of the trickster, a native shaman woman, condemned by the church as a witch, rises from her grave to free Jeremiah through her laughter. Gabriel, however, becomes the sacrificial meal, devoured and punctured in a ceremony of demonic communion, orgy and crucifixion (168–69). The *Weetigo* is both inside and outside. In the mall, as they enter "the belly of the beast" (119), the boys see the food court as an "apocalyptic communion. The world was one great, gaping mouth..." (120). In this scene, the boys depart the mall as if expelled from the rear end of a gorged and soulless beast. In the framing tale, the weasel accomplishes his goal but pays a price for his strategy: "'My coat!' moaned the weasel. 'My nice white coat is covered with shit!'" (121). As Richard Dyer explains in *White*, "Obsessive control of faeces and identification of them as the nadir of human dirt both characterise Western culture: to be white is to be well potty-trained" (76). In her editorial note to the special issue of *Third Text* on "Body Politics", Jean Fisher elaborates: "If the body confined and controlled has been the aim of the structures of power, it is in its 'emissions' metaphorically that it exerts its most powerful subversive force" (4).

These interconnected scenes are complex in ways I cannot fully elaborate here. They present postcolonial, racial and gay politics as inseparably intertwined and ambivalent. In focussing on the postcolonial implications of the allegory, I hope to invite further elaboration of its queer dimensions by those better read in this field than I am. Wendy Pearson's paper elsewhere in this volume commences this systematic investigation of Highway's work and its queer contexts. In reading this scene as an allegory for accepting the contaminated valency of Canadian postcolonial critique, I do not wish to close down its potential for other readings but merely to point out its reminder that the exit from the colonial heritage will be messy and compromising,

necessitating the abandonment of white privilege, fetishisations of purity, and possibly, of pleasurable transgression against such ideals of purity. Like José Marti a century ago, Highway writes from within the "belly of the beast". From this compromised location, there is only one escape. Jeremiah tries to make himself nothing but "intellect — pure, undiluted, precise" (205), but his brother's life and death pulls him back to the body, to his Native identity, and the material realities of the daily oppression of his people, which have been concentrated on the control and definition of the Native body. The raced and gendered body, as a dwelling place rather than a thing designed to consume or to be consumed, is thus the necessary medium for curing the *Weetigo* sickness.

As Highway explains in "A Note on the Trickster", a section preceding the Acknowledgments at the front of the novel, "there is no gender" in Cree. "The male-female-neuter hierarchy is entirely absent. So that by this system of thought, the central hero figure from our mythology — theology, if you will — is theoretically neither exclusively male nor exclusively female, or is both simultaneously" (n.p.). In *Kiss*, this non-gendered trickster-hero is complemented by a gendered creator-hero. Counterpointed against the weasel's bawdy tale, runs the story of the Son of Ayash, reiterated by Abraham on his death bed: "The world has become too evil. With these magic weapons, make a new world" (227). Highway's novel depicts the past forty years from the Cree perspective, showing non-native readers "a new world" in which they — that is, most of us — are the *Weetigo*, and he demonstrates how art can lead all races toward a potentially new world where the *Weetigo* is defeated by the weasel, outwitted by the Fur Queen, and eluded by the Son of Ayash. But not without the *Weetigo*'s guts touching all: the weasel is triumphant *and* compromised by his triumph. His coat remains marked by his passage through the entrails of the monster to this day.

Spit out of the mall, Jeremiah next appears in the school, listening to a history lesson in which Herr Schwarzkopf explains the missionary penetration of the "New World" that began at the turn of the sixteenth century. The long-winded, heavily accented explanation is followed by the curt translation: "'Penetration,' wrote the seventeen-year-old Cree scholar in his notebook, '1492'" (122). His teacher goes on to take lascivious delight in gruesome accounts of the burning of witches during the Spanish Inquisition, a scene the novel will later use to demonstrate the links between European misogyny, racism, and religious intolerance. The institutional setting of the school enables Highway to address the discipline of History directly, fulfilling the promise of his two epigraphs: from Duncan Campbell Scott, Deputy Superintendent General of the Department of Indian Affairs (1921), forbidding Native dancing, and Chief Seattle of the Squamish (1853), promising that "the dead are not powerless". These alternative sites of articulation — the Christian fear of indulgence in dancing and the Native understanding of life and death as a continuum — inform Highway's investigation of the institutional contexts of Canadian colonialism.

3. Institutional Contexts

Highway's novel interrogates the institutional contexts of mission, church, reservation, school, mall, bar, concert hall, and theatre, showing how each remains contaminated by an unacknowledged colonial arrogance and a genocidal mission. As if his point were not clear enough, he shows an uncomprehending theatre critic refusing to see the *Weetigo*/church/capitalism connections elaborated both throughout the novel, and in the brothers' play produced within the novel. The fictional critic writes: "But the cannibal spirit shedding his costume at death, revealing a priest's cassock, confuses the viewer. The image comes from nowhere and goes nowhere" (285). This is the nowhere of white denial. *Kiss* shows the containing and oppressive face of such Euro-Canadian claims to innocence, and it shows Jeremiah reluctantly embracing his denigrated Native heritage and eventually combining it with the European classical music he has learned to love and master.

For postmodern academic readers, it can be tempting to see the identity politics of the last two decades as a distracting diversion from the focus of earlier anti-colonialist struggles to redress power inequities on a social scale and to reclaim occluded histories. Yet as Roy Miki points out in *Broken Entries*, such movements often began as a necessary making visible of the racialising structures of a naturalised white dominance, which through the operations of colonial discursive strategies was recuperated in terms of exclusivist binaries such as authentic/inauthentic. Like many postcolonial theorists, I see arguments framed through claims to "authenticity", identity, or unproblematised experience as reproducing colonial discourse, denying history, and impeding social change. But that insight cannot be used indiscriminately to silence expressions of alternative world views or of resistance to imperialist hegemonies in other contexts. Postcolonial literary critics need to find ways to problematise understanding of experience as "not the origin of our explanation ... but rather that we seek to explain" (Scott, 26). As Scott suggests, "It is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience" (26). Such a formulation enables critics to disallow foundational appeals to the authority of experience without denying the testament of experience. At the conference in Australia where I first delivered a version of this paper, powerful statements were delivered by Aboriginal participants testifying to the injustices they had endured, the alarming increase in the rate of Aboriginal deaths in custody over the past few years, and the sustaining power that their culture held for them. The task for critics is to learn to read and help mobilise such narratives of experience in politically effective ways. Aboriginal critics at the conference asked why, after the federal report on Aboriginal deaths in custody was released to public fanfare, these deaths have increased over the past few years. Their reminder that textual documentation requires translation into analysis and action proves Scott's point that "Experience is at once always already an interpretation *and* is in need of interpretation" (37). My reading of Highway is not meant to reduce postcolonialism to what Imre Szeman, quoting Fanon, describes as "a massive

psychoexistential complex" (29), but it is designed to show how interwoven psychic and material conditions remain.

I think that the authentic subject debate may have its parallel in the authentic mode of resistance debate. Each relies on constricting binaries that reproduce the problems they seek to address and each seeks a universal answer to problems that are locally specific. Furthermore, the status of the literary needs as much attention as the status of the subject. It is necessary to try to understand why so many people continue to essentialise methods and cultural forms, through considering the kinds of cultural work such essentialising narratives can perform in various institutional contexts.

My own position, as a white teacher, researcher and administrator, compels me to deal with these questions as theoretical issues, but also as daily practical dilemmas. I encounter essentialised notions of experience in the classroom when white students sometimes react with anger and guilt to texts that are forcing their readers to confront a discomforting history and the arrogant construction of their own privileged experience as an invisible foundational norm for judgement. Texts by postcolonial writers or by people of colour are sometimes first received by white Canadian students as restricting or attacking their own agency. It is sometimes assumed that only students of colour engage in essentialist identity politics, but in my experience as a teacher, such reactions are not limited to any particular group. My job is to help each of my students past the disabling reactions they have learned through their experience growing up in a structurally racist society.

As an administrator, my job takes on different dimensions. I am required to enforce the new Tri-Council guidelines on the use of human subjects in research, and am beginning to encounter the problem of how academics deal with new assumptions about the ownership of individual and collective experiences. As Frank Davey has forewarned us, these university-wide protocols require researchers to explain the methodology, ethics and purpose of their projects, a practice students and instructors in the humanities have little experience in thinking through. Our accountability to the communities we serve is changing. It is not censorship to require proof of homework, a methodology, and a rationale for research that will be undertaken under the auspices of the university as an institution, but such requirements may create further scope for censorship, surveillance, and unnecessary paper and committee work, without necessarily producing more than the appearance of accountability. Finding the balance between legitimate demands for accountability and the equally legitimate need for academic freedom will not be easy, and we are unlikely to find a universal rule that can be indiscriminately applied.

The defence of the literary I am trying to mount here is not an attempt to exempt literary critics from social responsibility nor to enshrine an outdated notion of the Literary. As an "endangered species of activity" (Findlay, 9), literary criticism requires both rethinking and defence. Changing notions of ethics are revising society's views of the ways in which academic and creative

work must become accountable to the communities researched as well as the communities served. Very often such accountability if properly exercised will take the form of discomforting critique.

Throughout this paper, I have been asking what appeals to the revolutionary power of Native agency might mean in practice, and this question's corollary, what charges against the impotence of literary criticism deny about its practices. Critics such as San Juan Jr urge readers to move "beyond" the deconstructive complexities of postcolonial theory back to "the revolutionary power of native agency absent in postcolonial discourse" (269). But this assumes that Native agency is a singular and unproblematic construction. Through my reading of Highway's text, I have tried to demonstrate how complicated Native agency may be, and how helpful readings of literary texts may prove in reframing understandings of colonialism's legacy in Canada.

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Notes

[1] Helen Betty Osborne was a Native teenager living in The Pas, Manitoba, when she was abducted and murdered by four young, men on November 13, 1971. The police had little success with their investigation at the time, because of the general unwillingness of the local populace to assist the police in a case involving the murder of an aboriginal girl by white men. It was not until Constable Robert Urbanoski began to review the case in 1983 that any real progress took place. In 1987, sixteen years after the murder was committed, Dwayne Archie Johnston was found guilty of Osborne's murder and sentenced to life imprisonment without eligibility for parole for 10 years. James Robert Paul Houghton was tried and acquitted, while Lee Scott Colgan and Norman Bernard Manger were not brought to trial. See A. C. Hamilton and C. M. Sinclair, Report of the Aboriginal Justice Inquiry of Manitoba. Vol. 2: The Deaths of Helen Betty Osborne and John Joseph Harper (Winnipeg: Province of Manitoba, 1991). This document is also available online at http://www.ajic.mb.ca/volumell/toc.html.

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