

## **Canadian versus American State Discourse on Racial Categorization in Gerald Vizenor's *Bearheart* and Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water***

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Ian F. Haney López explains that

Race is not an immanent phenomenon located only in our heads, but an injurious material reality that constantly validates the common knowledge of race.... Through law, race becomes real becomes law becomes race in a self-perpetuating pattern altered in myriad ways but never broken. (133)

These laws and policies that determine the construction of race, however, vary in different countries, even while many residents may be unaware of this different construction outside their own country's border. Thus although many Aboriginal groups reject the border set up by the Canadian and U.S. governments as a relevant point of division, still Aboriginal writers engage in discourse with the national ideologies of racial or ethnic categorization. To better discuss this discourse I want to first cover briefly a few of the main differences in how Canada and the United States categorize racial or ethnic groups, differences that have emerged from my analysis of the national censuses and governmental policies in their evolution over the last two hundred years.

Questions asked on the census provide a good gauge of a country's beliefs, and the censuses' ways of classifying filter down into innumerable aspects of the daily lives of residents. Both the U.S. and Canadian censuses have varied the main question for collecting racial or ethnic data greatly over the years, but the U.S. census has always based its division around the idea of "race," whereas the Canadian census (up until 1996) has consistently centred around "ethnicity." I use race here to suggest categorization based on perceived (or imagined) skin colour, linked to the perception (or misperception) that one's race marks a genetic difference from other races. Ethnicity, on the other hand, describes categories that

represent cultural differences determined by language and cultural practices rather than by perceived skin colour and biology.

In the U.S. for instance, for the last twenty years the official federal government categories for division have been White, Black, American Indian, Asian or Pacific Islander, and Hispanic (with the option to consider Hispanic as a race or as a separate category in addition to race). Canada, on the other hand, gives as “examples” in the 1996 long version the categories French, English, German, Scottish, Canadian, Italian, Irish, Chinese, Cree, Micmac, Métis, Inuit, and 12 more followed by an “etc.” Furthermore, the United States has traditionally insisted on the exclusivity of race (a categorization system now kept to monitor and prevent racism): in the census a citizen can only belong to one race and to one of the five categories offered. The Canadian census, on the other hand, supports multiple and self-defined ethnicities. In keeping with Canadian policies of multiculturalism, respondents can choose their cultural identity, choose to have more than one, and, for the last fifty years, can choose to claim that they are ethnically only “Canadian,” unlike the U.S. census where respondents cannot identify as only “American” for their race or for their cultural background. Not only does the U.S. government historically divide according to exclusive races, but it sets up a dividing line specifically between White and non-White people (where Whites receive privileges from which non-Whites are excluded), as exemplified in the country’s history of segregation, the “one-drop” rule defining African-Americans, and its early court cases arguing for exclusion of immigrants based on their “non-Whiteness.” The problem with the Canadian system, conversely, is simply that it becomes difficult to tabulate statistics that could reflect discrimination against a particular group linked by a common perceived skin colour or perceived race, thus making it easier to deny on a federal level the prevalence of racism in Canada. It wasn’t until 1996 that Statistics Canada made the still very controversial decision to include a category tabulating “visible minorities” similar to the American race category—although pointedly avoiding the word “race”—a move in direct contrast to the decision in the U.S. to allow respondents to check more than one racial category for the first time on the year 2000 census.

Over the years, both countries have taken away rights granted to Aboriginal people in treaties by progressively limiting the legal definition for who

qualifies as American Indian or Aboriginal. In Canada, however, this reduction in numbers was achieved by limiting the federal definition in the Indian Register with perhaps the most notable exclusion being of Aboriginal women married to non-Aboriginal men and their descendants up until 1985. The United States federal government, in contrast, never had any one rule to define American Indians but instead has used many different “blood” percentages to define them for various purposes at different times, sometimes having individual tribes determine their required “blood quantum.” So ideologically, what this says is that in Canada, being Aboriginal has to do with an official “special status” whereas in the U.S. being legally Native American relates again to the idea of a genetically determined “race” that requires a certain percentage of “blood.”<sup>1</sup>

For the sake of time, I will limit my discussion to how two well-known Aboriginal works engage in discourse with these state policies on categorization—one from either side of the border: Gerald Vizenor’s *Bearheart: The Heirship Chronicles* and Thomas King’s *Green Grass, Running Water*. Although radically different in tone, these two postmodern novels both challenge limiting definitions of Aboriginal peoples and show how the legal system manipulates these definitions to take away land or rights.

From the beginning of *Bearheart*, Vizenor replicates the U.S. racial binary, White versus Aboriginal. In the first six chapters, he provides a history of North American colonialism in microcosm when federal officials use legal terminology to seize the Cedar Circus where Proude Cedarfair and his wife, Rosina, live, and Proude must jump through the rhetorical hoops of the colonizer’s discourse in declaring his sacred cedar circle a “sovereign nation” (8). Finally, however, Proude and his wife must flee their home, so they set off with a group of Aboriginal pilgrims seeking some way to survive in a post-contact nightmarish world progressively destroyed by the violent encroachment of White colonial culture and values. To the pilgrims, Aboriginal myth and feeling become the centre of meaning again, and Vizenor parodies their antithesis—White culture’s obsession with words and definitions—by having the pilgrims pass through the

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<sup>1</sup>See my dissertation for a more detailed description of these differences in the U.S. and Canadian national censuses and governmental policies and also of how Vizenor and King engage them.

Bioavaracious Regional Word Hospital, where technicians attempt to explain everything through structural analysis of words and syntax. In response to Proude's warm greeting that "We are grateful for the privilege to be here," the "word doctors" can only respond by questioning his use of the word "here" as opposed to "there," and ending with the confusing logic, "this moment we meet is not the moment we met, but we think it is as we speak, because we know what we want to know" (165).

Vizenor parodies White colonial culture's deployment of defining words against Aboriginal people particularly in the idea of citizenship, as when the federal agents use this concept against Proude to try to make him relinquish his Cedar Circus. When one explains, "the government will have every citizen understand that half the national trees are being protected as a federal resource," Proude responds simply "but we are not citizens" (26), himself here (and repeatedly later) insisting on the bifurcation of exclusive racial categories that the colonizers set out but forget when convenient. Vizenor thus supports M. Annette Jaimes's argument that historically the United States granted Native people citizenship only when this status would facilitate taking away land their ancestors had inhabited for generations (Jaimes 21), and he replicates the U.S. categorization system exemplified in the census, where simply "American" is not an acceptable answer for race or ethnicity, and where the position as first of the racial category "White" may relate Whiteness to being American in the minds of many respondents. Although society does not want them to belong, it uses terminology of belonging when these words help to further deprive them of their rights.

Vizenor takes the bifurcation between the two ideologies to an extreme so that at points in the novel Whiteness becomes associated with evil. Some of the most violent people the pilgrims meet on their journey are described as "the sons and daughters of whitepeople who had lost their leases on reservation lakeshore properties" (54) who then brutally kill and mutilate reservation drunks and capture the action on film. Now out on parole, this crowd mobs the pilgrims' car with a "pile of whitebodies" to such an extent that the pilgrims barely escape as the car is engulfed and explodes. The excessively detailed description here of the burning pieces of "whiteflesh" and "whitebodies" (56-57) and later pilgrim Bigfoot's disturbing remarks inciting and trivializing the rape of "whitewomen" to

some people he terms “goddamn whitepeople” (71-72), again recreate the binary of exclusive races, reverse the racism usually targeting Aboriginals to target Whites instead, and expose the violence and misogyny produced by such racism to any readers with a strong enough stomach to persevere and analyze the many ultra-violent images. At other times in the novel, however, Vizenor deconstructs the idea of White as evil to show how he uses this idea only to expose, through reversal, the damage of a social discourse present in American culture. One Aboriginal pilgrim named Matchi recites a mantra reversing the American construct of the “one-drop rule” throughout the chapter on the “Gay Minikins”: “our women were poisoned part white.” But Proude apologetically refutes Matchi’s words to mixed-blood pilgrim Belladonna as “Terminal names,” and explains that Matchi “was taken with the evil word sorcerers” (59), even while with Belladonna’s name Vizenor playfully again reifies the poisoning to which Matchi alludes.

And Belladonna’s downfall further illustrates how this possibility raised of Aboriginal as all good and White as all bad is unacceptable. Invited to speak at one stop on their journey, Belladonna fails to note that her hosts avoid all essentialist beliefs, which they term “terminal creeds” and take to be the root of society’s downfall. She chooses Indian Identity as her topic. Using an unspecified first person plural pronoun to designate the racial category Indian, Belladonna laces her speech with a string of stereotypes, “We are raised with values that shape our world in a different light... We are tribal and that means that we are the children of dreams and visions... Our bodies are connected to mother earth and our minds are part of the clouds” (194). Because Belladonna does not know how to speak the playful language of poststructuralism and gets angry when they interrupt, her hosts see her as an irredeemable propagator of terminal creeds and cheerfully vote to award her with her “just desserts,” a dessert cookie she proudly eats, not knowing it is coated in time-released poison. Vizenor’s message becomes that “terminal creeds” such as American ideas about race must be avoided, but that, paradoxically, we can never completely escape them, just as Belladonna cannot find much to say about Indian identity without resorting to stereotypes tied to essentialist clichés about race and “blood.” The post-apocalyptic society Vizenor constructs is unforgiving, and all the pilgrims who cannot find a way to avoid “terminal creeds” die similar gruesome deaths. Still the novel ends reinforcing the

essentialist binary set out from the beginning of there being a unified Aboriginal culture that presents salvation from the evil of White colonizers—the same belief Belladonna dies painfully for espousing—since the remaining pilgrims are rewarded by discovering finally the Mecca of the Southwest pueblos where Aboriginal people live as they always have. In this utopia, Proude and Rosina enter permanently into the realm of myth, a sort of pre-Oedipal Imaginary, when he and his blind disciple become human bears and she becomes Changing Woman, and generations of the local people tell stories about seeing them in the wilderness.

Although perhaps without the complexity of Vizenor's poststructural version, many Native *American* works similarly reflect the U.S. binary of exclusive races. This is particularly so, for instance, in what a number of critics have cited as a tradition of novels where the protagonist struggles between two ways of life—the culture of the reservation and the culture of “White” society—and where often this protagonist returns home to the reservation after living a number of years in the world outside.<sup>2</sup> Thomas King also notes this tradition when he has Eli Stands Alone in *Green Grass, Running Water* think of himself at one point as “The Indian who couldn't go home” (316) and sarcastically observe to himself how this theme of a binary between Native and White ways of life repeats itself in popular culture:

It was a common enough theme in novels and movies. Indian leaves the traditional world of the reserve, goes to the city, and is destroyed. Indian leaves the traditional world of the reserve, is exposed to white culture, and becomes trapped between two worlds. Indian leaves the traditional world of the reserve, gets an education, and is shunned by his tribe. (317)

In *Green Grass, Running Water*, King consciously chooses not to repeat this pattern, and in so doing he applies an optimistic version of the Canadian ideology of optionally multiple ethnicity in order not to reproduce the American binary of

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<sup>2</sup>See for instance, Louis Owens (22-27), William Bevis, Robert Dale Parker (898-99) and Robert Silberman (101). Some examples of novels particularly reflecting this pattern are N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*, John Joseph Mathews' *Sundown*, James Welch's *Winter in the Blood*, D'Arcy McNickle's *The Surrounded*, and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*.

exclusive races where Aboriginal and White values are in perpetual conflict. This difference parallels the difference Robert Appleford notes in U.S. and Canadian films about Natives, where small-budget Canadian films like King's *Medicine River* contrast bigger American films specifically with their "violation of the conflict model" (114). In *Green Grass, Running Water*, the central character of the realistic story line is patriotically named for the Canadian province in which all the action occurs: Alberta. A history professor at the University of Calgary, Alberta has a successful career as well as at least some connection to her Blackfoot culture, as do other Blackfoot characters—Eli, Charlie, and Latisha, are respectively a retired University of Toronto English professor, a lawyer, and a restaurant owner. When Lionel thinks about going back to university to get a degree, he thinks, "Like Charlie. Like Alberta. Like Eli. Like almost everyone he knew" (307). King tries to present a range of different possibilities for Natives just as for the rest of Canadians, explaining in an interview, "I wanted to emphasize that the range of 'Indian' is not as narrow as many people try to make it" (Canton 3).

Like Proude in *Bearheart*, Eli in *Green Grass* also understands that the definitions of legal discourse will ruin his culture and adopts this official colonial discourse to prevent his land from being usurped. He gets an injunction at the last minute against the Duplessis company's plans to operate a giant dam it has constructed on the reservation to produce power and Parliament lake for vacationers. Yet, King stresses that for Eli, unlike for Proude, his identity comes as much from affiliations with contemporary dominant culture as it does from his Blackfoot heritage. Eli corrects Duplessis employee Clifford Sifton's claim that Eli and his relatives "aren't real Indians" because they "drive cars, watch television, go to hockey games" (155). When Clifford objects, "you speak as good English as me"—suggesting that Natives who speak English must have renounced their cultural heritage—Eli contests and also pulls rank, pointing out that he, Eli, speaks far "better" English than Clifford (after all, he was an English professor at one of Canada's top universities), but adding, "And I speak Blackfoot too. My sisters speak Blackfoot. So do my niece and nephew" (155). Still Clifford protests, "That's what I mean. Latisha runs a restaurant and Lionel sells televisions. Not exactly traditionalists, are they?" (155). But Eli gets the last word, repeating Clifford's mildly sarcastic tone and his "exactly" and stressing that Native identity, like everything else evolves, with, "It's not exactly the nineteenth century, either"

(155). Unlike in Belladonna's vision of Indian identity in *Bearheart*, King separates modern Blackfoot identity from the static imaginary of pre-contact stereotype, presenting his characters living as successful Canadians while also celebrating a particular cultural tradition, an idea familiar to a Canadian audience steeped in the official rhetoric of multiculturalism.

Whereas Vizenor's *Proude* and *Rosina* disavow their citizenship and the idea of nationhood, the Four ancient Indians from the mythical narrative in King's novel point out a difference as the trees disappear between Northern Montana and Southern Alberta. Ishmael says, "Canada.... What a good idea," and Robinson Crusoe continues, like a true tourist, "We certainly enjoyed ourselves the last time we were here" (20). Another character named Lionel draws a line between himself and the American Indian Movement when trying to get out of going to Wounded Knee (where he later gets in trouble) by objecting "I'm Canadian" (61), and later, "I'm from Blossom, Alberta" (61), and again, "I'm from Canada" (62). Tellingly, it is only to the Native *Americans* that the national boundary makes no difference as they think in terms of racial unity: "Every Indian in Salt Lake is going to be there. We need your support" (61). They give him a badge that says AIM: "'Put one on,' said Eddie. 'Red and proud!'" (63).

In fact, the novel draws many distinctions between Canadians and Americans instead of between "racial" groups, reflecting the difference in how "American" identity came to be founded on rejecting non-White people,<sup>3</sup> whereas so much of Canadian nationhood was founded on rejecting the American move for independence from Britain, and reflecting also how the American census asks about a respondent's race even before asking about citizenship status,<sup>4</sup> whereas the Canadian census has a contrary ordering, with ethnicity (and since 1996, visible minority status) coming after place of birth, nationality, and languages spoken, among other identifying factors.<sup>5</sup> Various characters in the novel raise amusing differences between Canadians and Americans even while the text also includes hints that these differences are just offensive stereotypes. Latisha's

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<sup>3</sup>This premise is one of the main ideas behind the foundation of Critical Race Theory. See, for instance, Kimberlé Crenshaw, et al., Haney López and James R. Barrett and David Roediger.

<sup>4</sup> See census questions listed in the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census for examples of this ordering.

<sup>5</sup> For the most recent census, for example, see Statistics Canada.

estranged American husband, George, illustrates in his comments how these stereotypes may at once offend and yet contain a grain of truth: “Put fifty Canadians in a room with one American, and the American will be in charge in no time” (172), and, “When a cop pulls a Canadian over for speeding on an open road with no other car in sight, the Canadian is happy. I’ve even seen them thank the cop for being so alert. What else can I say?” (176).

Yet, multiculturalism’s focus on how someone can be Canadian and still celebrate an ethnic heritage also makes it more difficult to see that a particular group may suffer discrimination based on race and that one ethnic group may have a different history, and therefore different rights, than other groups. King illustrates this problem with Canadian discourse in Clifford’s complaint to Eli that he wishes the government would “*give* [him] some” [italics mine] of the rights he perceives French Canadians and Aboriginal people as having (150). Eli, of course, corrects this perspective, pointing to how Native people have “paid for the[se rights] two or three times” (151). And King goes to great lengths to show the results of institutionalized racism and stereotyping, for instance, Lionel learns through popular culture that Indians are the “bad guys” and to want to be John Wayne when he grows up.

Instead of ending with a binary where Natives must choose between two ways of life, the novel ends with the four ancient Indians and the mythical trickster figure, Coyote, who accompanies them, “fixing” things so that the Blackfoot perspective permanently affects Canadian culture. The four Indians change the ending of a Western (video and novel) so that the Indians (led by Lionel’s uncle who acts as the chief) become the heroes, killing an astonished John Wayne and Richard Widmark, instead of vice versa. This change in popular culture not only precedes Lionel performing a heroic act among his friends and family, but it also echoes the novel’s parallel mythical narrative, which has as its main purpose to undo the myths of Western, Christian, patriarchal culture. For example, miracles attributed to Jesus Christ turn out to have been performed by mythical Old Woman, who is really one of the four Indians from the realistic narrative (387-91). In addition, an earthquake slams three stolen cars (mysteriously appearing in Parliament Lake) into the Grand Baleen Dam, destroying it and granting Eli a post-mortem victory over Duplessis company, and Alberta achieves the pregnancy she so wanted without having to choose between

her two boyfriends—this seemingly immaculate conception, like the earthquake, apparently attributable to mischievous Coyote. Blackfoot myths, becoming central to the realistic narrative and changing things for the better, negate the American binary and reflect an optimistic version of multicultural thinking where parts of various ethnicities build the fabric of Canadian society and can overcome racism.

Discussing particularly views of the Other, Edward Said in *Orientalism* explains how “texts purporting to contain knowledge about something actual... can *create* not only knowledge but also the very reality they appear to describe. In time such knowledge and reality produce a tradition, or what Michel Foucault calls a discourse” (94). Official discourse represented in national censuses and legal policies provide examples of “texts... that can *create*... the very reality they appear to describe,” but so too do works of writers like Vizenor and King which may help reify or renegotiate—in interplay with documents like the census—new and evolving national realities of race and ethnicity.

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