



THE AMERICAN WESTERN IN CANADIAN LITERATURE

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Tom King's John Wayne

Indigenous Perspectives on the Western

Explaining the decline of Prairie regionalism, Alison Calder states that “[o]ne problem that has not been talked about, but that eclipses all others, is that there is no way that Aboriginal people can be accommodated in this agri-centric definition of prairie literature” (“Importance” 171). One solution is to “centre” ourselves with help from Indigenous perspectives, as this chapter does (instead of situating it later, in the chronological chapters, in spite of its generally recent texts). Another is to consider the Western, as this chapter obviously does too, because Indigenous people cannot be ignored in a study of the Western in which “cowboys and Indians” are definitive iconography. Stereotypes of the “Indian” are widely critiqued in Indigenous literature and in scholarship such as Leslie Monkman’s *A Native Heritage* (1981), Daniel Francis’s *The Imaginary Indian* (1992), and Armando José Prats’s *Invisible Natives* (2002). The one by Prats is the most pointed at the Western and its representations. Rather less well-known, however, are Indigenous perspectives on the genre of the Western—perspectives conveyed in popular culture that predated Hollywood’s studio system but were later marginalized (Bold, “Did Indians” 137–8). This is indeed a concern, partly because Indigenous writers understandably seem to avoid writing the Western per se. And yet several creative writers north of the Medicine Line have written *around* the Western, most notably Thomas King in *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993), Garry Gottfriedson in *Whiskey Bullets: Cowboy and Indian Heritage Poems* (2006), Jordan Abel in *Un/Inhabited* (2015) and *Injun* (2016), and Zacharias Kunuk and Natar Ungalaaq in *Maliglutit* (2016, written in Inuktitut with Norman

Cohn). King's novel is arguably the inspirational Canadian Western, or post-Western, that started the contemporary boom in Canadian Westerns (followed by Guy Vanderhaeghe's more Western-focused 1996 novel *The Englishman's Boy*). Its publication in the early 1990s and its representation of John Wayne coincided with a time when John Wayne often either came out on top in polls asking Americans about their favourite stars, or else lost to Clint Eastwood (Wills 11). Hence, the title of this chapter.

There is also one text mostly by non-Indigenous writers in this chapter: the director Mani Soleymanlou's *Gabriel Dumont's Wild West Show* (2017/2021, written by a collective of French, English, and Métis playwrights—Dalpé et al.). I was advised by the playwrights that the play *in toto* should not be presumed to be Indigenous given that most of the writers are non-Indigenous, and that the Cree and Michif in the play are minimal compared to the English and French. I am non-Indigenous too and have no authority in defining Indigenous identities or deciding the issues. Nevertheless, I want *Gabriel Dumont's Wild West Show* in this chapter as a brief example. In responding to the American Western, it proposes a comparatively real, historical, Indigenous figure to counterbalance “cowboys” such as John Wayne and of course Buffalo Bill Cody, whose power to affect Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous views of them is derived from popular culture.¹

Sherman Alexie's and Louise Erdrich's perspectives on Wayne merit attention too, but as arguably American examples, I will reflect on them mainly in passing, as I do with (other) American texts later in this book. Daniel Heath Justice explains:

Critical currents in the United States have had an important influence on discussions of Indigenous literatures in Canada, but they have not constituted those discussions; there are substantive historical, social, and political differences between Aboriginal peoples in Canada and American Indians in the United States, and these are as influential on the

1 See chapter 5, “CanLit's Postmodern Westerns,” for a related example that invokes Gabriel Dumont by way of his more famous ally and leader, Louis Riel, in Frank Davey's *The Louis Riel Organ and Piano Co.* (1985).

literatures and scholarly studies of those literatures as are the inevitable exchanges. One necessary caveat regarding such exchanges, however: as is the case with many things, Native lit scholars in Canada tend to be far more inclusive of and familiar with the literature and criticism coming out of the States than is evidenced by many of our counterparts in the United States, to the great detriment of the latter. (337)

So, although this chapter (re)casts the long shadow of John Wayne, its counterpoints are primarily Canadian, insofar as “Canadian” is an accepted term for people who live or have lived for long periods on the land now officially called “Canada.” The examples of Indigenous peoples on Turtle Island, or North America, are instructive: they show that sharply defined borders are historically contingent and not often, or not for long, capable of demarcating cultural movements and influences. Further, in that “Indigenous literature reaches out to settler communities to advance social justice, to heal the wounds of oppression, and to reconcile our communities” (Jo-Ann Episkenew, qtd. in *Justice* 337), the “Indigenous literature” of this chapter is what King defines as “interfusional”—that is, literature that blends genres of oral tradition and colonial writing (“Godzilla” 14). They are not “associational” (14) examples that centre on Indigenous communities and cultures outside of the context of colonization. They are starkly responsive to the colonial culture on display in the West, yet also interested in stepping into popular culture to popularize Indigenous concerns.

Indeed, Christine Bold shows that Indigenous writers and performers have been aware of this popular culture and engaged in it since the earliest dime novels and the related Wild West shows of the late nineteenth century (“Did Indians” 138, 151–2). Although they rarely had control over their own representations in this culture, there were exceptions, such as the Indigenous director James Young Deer and his influential silent films, including *White Fawn’s Devotion* (1910).² In fact, Joanna Hearne demon-

2 Young Deer’s tribal identity is not entirely clear; usually he is considered to be Ho-Chunk (a.k.a., Winnebago) (e.g., Hearne 5, 45), but he was not registered as such (Sweet), leading to some speculation.

strates three phases of more than a century of Indigenous involvement in Westerns in *Native Recognition: Indigenous Cinema and the Western* (2012).³ It is not a case of Indigenous people who have been represented by others in what Renée Hulan calls “the absence of dialogue, that is, when some have no voice” (203), but neither is it a case of mainstream non-Indigenous writers and filmmakers co-operating as equals with Indigenous counterparts to produce Westerns that represent Indigenous peoples harmlessly or fairly. I do not consider myself to be co-operating with Indigenous counterparts (except insofar as one of my research assistants has identified as Indigenous, specifically Mi’kmaq), but I am trying to relay and amplify Indigenous voices—“amplifying” rather minimally because most or all of the Indigenous writers in this chapter have greater public profiles than I do. Partly because of their own steadily rising status in Canadian arts and letters, Indigenous creators have not been silent in the face of the Western and its key figures.

John Wayne and the Reel of the Western

One such figure is the American movie star John Wayne. When Wayne died in 1979 after a long career, the American poet Louis Phillips commented on the star’s historical significance in “Considering the Death of John Wayne,”⁴ a poem that predates by fourteen years Thomas King’s even more daring “consideration” in his novel *Green Grass, Running Water*:

Mouth-sore with bad breath,
A runny-eyed roan, sway-backed,
What kind of a horse is death? (265)

In 1974, *CBS News* reported that the “conservative Wayne” had visited the comparatively liberal Harvard University upon invitation from the

3 According to Hearne, the phases are Indigenous involvement in (1) early silent films; (2) mid-century documentaries; and (3) late-century and millennial feature films (as per the tripartite structure of her book). For more Indigenous perspectives on the Western in cinema, see “studies by . . . Jacqueline Kilpatrick (Choctaw and Cherokee), Beverly Singer (Tewa and Diné), and Angela Aleiss” (Hearne 7).

4 With “Considering the Death of John Wayne,” Phillips is possibly alluding to an e. e. cummings poem, “Buffalo Bill’s” (1923), where Bill is a “blue-eyed boy” who rides “a watersmooth-silver / stallion” toward the waiting “Mister Death.”

provocative *Harvard Lampoon*, arriving on an “armoured personnel carrier” (CBS) offered to him by supporters in the reserves. Phillips remembers the scene in his poem: “He went to Harvard in a tank / Which is one way to get there” (265). If you remember Wayne’s voice, you can hear it in the second of these lines. Phillips is partly ventriloquizing, which helps to show how any persona is like a dummy that someone else can manipulate, as King does with Wayne in *Green Grass, Running Water*. Although the “tank” can also be manipulated or driven as a symbol of modernity after the First World War, Phillips gives John Wayne a nineteenth-century form of transportation as a metaphor of death in his poem. He describes Wayne’s death from cancer as a ride on a “runny-eyed roan, sway-backed” and “bob-tailed,” “a terrible old nag” (Phillips 265). The metaphor of death as transportation is actually a conceit that spurs the poem from the beginning, with the reference to the “tank” as “one way to get there.” In Phillips’s poem, the metonymic transition from tank to horse ironically reverses the evolution of horse to “Iron Horse” or train, a tank-like vehicle in its power over landscape. The transition humanizes Wayne, but it also suggests that he is historically backward, even degenerate, in spite of his perennial celebrity. The poem and its historical contexts introduce many of the ideas that preoccupy me in this chapter, such as the politics of celebrity and the fascination with dead celebrities.⁵ King, too, is preoccupied with these ideas, and in *Green Grass, Running Water* and other texts he articulates his stake in a popular culture that has a pernicious influence on opinions of the First Nations and Native Americans beyond and within those groups. As King suggests, the problem is that figures such as Wayne spin off from popular culture into history, or at least into popular conceptions of history, and give the false impression that modern Indigenous

5 In John Wayne’s final film, *The Shootist* (Siegel, 1976), Mrs. Rogers suggests that Wayne’s character J. B. Books should see a priest before he dies, but he retorts, “I’m tired of people pawing over my death for this reason or that or for any reason. A man’s death is about the most private thing in his life. It doesn’t belong to Dobkins or Reverend Saunders or Thibodeau or you, it’s mine.” In addition to the coincidental parallels between Wayne and Books here, there is also the film’s commentary on celebrity. Young Gillom Rogers (Ron Howard), starstruck, says to Books, “You’re the most famous person to ever come into this town. And when I was a boy I heard all about your shootout at the Acme saloon.” Not long afterward, when Books’s presence in the town is common knowledge, the reporter (Richard Lenz) visits and says, “You must appreciate, sir, that you are the most celebrated shootist extant.”

culture is an oxymoron; it was *supposed* to have died in the nineteenth century.⁶

As King does in his novel, and as Phillips does with his contrast of the horse and tank, Louise Erdrich uses Wayne as a pretext for commenting on figures of the Western and their positions in modernity. Her poem “Dear John Wayne” (1984/2003) is set in a drive-in theatre where Indigenous viewers are sitting on the hood of a car watching a Western, starring Wayne, and “the drive-in picture is packed” (21). Phillips used a horse and tank in relation to modernity, but here Erdrich sets up the same relationship with a car, a “Pontiac,” a name that refers not only to the twentieth-century brand but also to the eighteenth-century Odawa chief who fought against the British around Fort Detroit. The appropriation of the historical figure’s name for a car is also his dehumanization (or “degeneration” to the symbolic equivalent of a horse, a trope that I consider in chapter 6). Similarly, the poem’s title alludes to the tradition not of love letters but breakup letters, suggesting that her presumably Indigenous speaker wants to cut ties with Wayne, whose star power helped to popularize cinematic representations of Indigenous peoples that are often dehumanizing or abusive. Although he, too, is dehumanized when “[h]e smiles, a horizon of teeth” (Erdrich 22), the implication is that his onscreen charisma is powerfully colonial (expanding toward the frontier of the “horizon”) and consumerist (associated with “teeth” and eating). And whereas the viewers leave the drive-in “speechless and small / as people are when the movie is done” (22), Wayne has a “voice” that is “still playing” (22), sustained and amplified by the technologies of film.

These technologies in Erdrich’s “Dear John Wayne” are juxtaposed with military technologies associated, perhaps unexpectedly, with “the Indians.” Seemingly describing the action onscreen, the speaker says,

Always the lookout spots the Indians first,
spread north to south, barring progress.

6 Following King, Carlton Smith offers a gloss, that Frederick Jackson Turner’s famous speech about the frontier (and his book on the topic) “inaugurated a kind of cultural monologue, a long history in which pop culture became the refractory point for oppressive colonialist allegories” (3) that either neglected or maligned non-white peoples and thereby set them against Turner’s Americanness.

The Sioux or some other Plains bunch
in spectacular columns, ICBM missiles,
feathers bristling in the meaningful sunset. (21)

In a series of figurative associations produced by the act of looking at the screen, the viewers are metonymically associated with, first, “the hordes of mosquitoes” (21) that are pestering them; and, second, the onscreen image of “the Indians” appearing metaphorically as “spectacular columns, ICBM missiles” (21). Of course, no Western starring Wayne was ever set at a historical moment when ICBMs (intercontinental ballistic missiles) existed. The “Indians” in their “spectacular columns” seem to remind the speaker of images of ICBMs, thereby implying that the Indigenous people are a growing threat of modern warfare. Ironically, however, the viewers’ lack of agency as they leave the drive-in suggests that they are indeed powerless, in keeping with their being stereotyped as a pre-modern or primitive threat.

These binaries of powerful and powerless are valid but also called into question in “Dear John Wayne,” because Erdrich invokes various kinds of screens and thereby implies that the whole scene of the drive-in is hyperreal: a Baudrillardian illusion. In one of the poem’s deft shifts of point of view, “the lookout” in the movie might be looking *not* at “Indians” elsewhere in the diegesis but *out of the screen* at the Indigenous audience, whose positions on the hoods of cars would also frame them with the windshield, which is sometimes also called a *windscreen*. Furthermore, Erdrich plays on the military technique of a “smoke screen” (21) by invoking “the slow-burning spirals” (21) of mosquito deterrents that the viewers use (in vain) to make their viewing experience more comfortable. In effect, there is a (wind) screen whose reflections of a (silver) screen are filtered through a (smoke) screen, and the viewers are stuck in the middle. Their powerlessness could be a result of their liminality, their in-betweenness, a state of being that is intensified by their highly mediated environment. In that mediascape (to borrow a term from Arjun Appadurai), Indigenous people are as modern as anyone, but modern technologies such as mosquito deterrents are ineffective against threats of a natural environment that is generically associated with Indigenous peoples and their traditions. Are these nineteenth- or late twentieth-century “Indians”? According to

Carlton Smith in *Coyote Kills John Wayne* (2000), Erdrich's acknowledgement of temporally complex identities means that "[h]istory too is . . . destabilized, moving in and out of the present, leaving 'tracks' that will keep altering the present" (111). I agree; I only shift the emphasis. In "Dear John Wayne," the movie that they watch both narrates and visualizes their loss of power, but they have little recourse to the advantages of their own historiography, partly because their histories have been popularly misunderstood as histories of loss, defeat, and disappearance.

Popular culture as a threat bigger than history—that is one concern of this chapter, and it is one possible motivation for King's wading into the literary end of popular culture: to question it from within, as Erdrich does by implying that her position is fully screened-in. When King wrote *Green Grass, Running Water*, he had not yet made all of those strides, but he was imagining them. Although the next part of this chapter is about the popular culture of the Western in *Green Grass, Running Water*, it is also about the publicity of John Wayne compared to that of "Tom King," and the former fantasized by the latter. Although I have corresponded once or twice with King, I am not familiar with him personally; I call Thomas King "Tom" here and in the title as a reminder of the public persona he developed in the late 1990s on CBC Radio's *Dead Dog Café Comedy Hour* and during his candidacy for a seat in Parliament in 2008—where in both cases he is "Tom." In *Green Grass, Running Water*, King is teaching us lessons about popular culture and the publicity of "Indians" that he would develop not only on radio but also through his photographic series of "Native artists in Lone Ranger masks" (qtd. in Christie 76) and in the short film *I'm Not the Indian You Had in Mind* (King, 2007). ("Indian" is one of King's preferred terms, and it reminds me of how this essentially geographic error forms identities and shapes the idea of West; its continued use—not so much by King as by uncritical others—reminds me that newcomers still have a long way to go in arriving at a correct understanding of the First Peoples.) Following, for example, Gerald Vizenor's short film *Harold of Orange* (Weise, 1984), and anticipating later examples such as *Reel Injun* (2010), King pioneers what Stuart Christie calls "Indigenous Convergent Media" to insert Indigenous peoples into the reel of popular culture and *then* a new history.

The reel of the Western specifically is the object of attraction and scrutiny in *Green Grass, Running Water*, the first but not the only of King's book-length genre fictions. In brief, this novel interweaves a cycle of creation stories from Indigenous and Christian sources, classic literary symbols such as the whale from Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851), contemporary plots such as the collapse of a hydroelectric dam, and the fantastic sequence in which the "Indians" insert themselves into a John Wayne movie and rewrite the ending so that he dies and they win. Of all King's work, this novel is the one most completely devoted to deconstructing genre and popular culture.⁷ *Green Grass, Running Water* is a postmodern and post-Western twist on the earlier sub-genres of the Western that Richard Slotkin identifies as "pro-Indian" and "alternative" (*Gunfighter* 366–8, 628–33) and of what has been called the revisionist and literary Western (Evans 407). *Green Grass, Running Water* begins by critiquing the Western from the non-diegetic *outside*, from the vantage of a frame story in which most of the characters watch the same televised Western featuring John Wayne, but then inserts newly mythologized "Indians" into the movie to change the genre from the diegetic *inside*.

The Western is a historically engaged and nostalgic genre, but the implicit comparison of the present to the Old West or Wild West is not often made obvious through framing narratives such as those in *Broken Arrow* (Daves, 1950), *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (Ford, 1962), *Back to the Future III* (Zemeckis, 1990), and *The Hateful Eight* (Tarantino, 2015). These films are exceptions, as is Guy Vanderhaeghe's novel *The Englishman's Boy* (1996). The Western tends to bring us close to the action. The framing narrative in *Green Grass, Running Water*, however, creates a distancing effect that also helps King's own readers to avoid the nostalgia so crucial to Westerns. Coincidentally, another book by a Native American writer

7 King has also published five detective novels (2002, 2006, 2018, 2019, 2020) that also critique popular culture (e.g., detective films and reality TV), and some of the later ones begin to play with fiction/reality and diegetic/non-diegetic binaries. He once said that he "wanted to separate [his] serious work from [his] detective fiction" (qtd. in Breitbach, 84)—presumably "serious work" like *Green Grass, Running Water*. Julia Breitbach, however, claims that the serious versus generic distinction is "artificial" (88), partly because King "wittily rewrites not just genre formula, but—even more so than in his take on the hard-boiled mode—debunks stereotypes of Nativeness on the go" (89). To me, *Green Grass, Running Water* is serious because King implies that the genre would be better if it were significantly changed (e.g., had different outcomes), and I don't get the same impression from his detective fiction.

published in 1993 similarly avoids nostalgia; in Sherman Alexie's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, one of the "Indian" characters dreams of being "a gunfighter with braids and a ribbon shirt. He wouldn't speak English, just whisper Spokane as he gunned down Wild Bill Hickok, Bat Masterson, even Billy the Kid. . . . [W]hite and Indian people would sing ballads about him" (232).⁸ As Smith implies in the title of his book, *Coyote Kills John Wayne*, the nostalgia for an alternative history suggests that King's fantasy about the death of American celebrity is not simply a "Canadian" affair; it is a concern other Indigenous writers have about the pop culture of the Western. Conventionalized through repetition of narrative and trope, the genre encourages us to appreciate rather than critique nostalgia. When generic conventions are repeated but not challenged, they enable fictional representations to support real-life ideology—a slippage from illusion to reality. Such a slippage is like the biographical fallacy of assuming that the character is like the actor. *Green Grass, Running Water* treats John Wayne distantly, as the Other, refusing to personalize or historicize the man behind the persona. To do so might be to create sympathy in readers and to individualize a key problem of the Western genre: the idolization of gunfighters and the related nostalgia for their passing. Correspondingly, in *I'm Not the Indian You Had in Mind*, King considers "this Indian you idolize" to be the detrimentally kitschy idol of a cigar-store "Indian," an equally problematic figure because of nostalgia for the Vanishing "Indian" instead of support for contemporary Indigenous cultures. The nostalgia encourages overly selective memories and distorted histories. In *Screening the Past: Memory and Nostalgia in Cinema* (2005), Pam Cook argues that "the distinction between nostalgia, memory and history has become blurred" (3), and that "nostalgia is generally associated with fantasy" (3). Cook prefers to see history, memory, and nostalgia as a "continuum" (3) on which memory partly validates nostalgia so that it is not dismissed as inauthentic or fantastic. King would probably agree with her in that respect. Indeed, one reason why he disavows nostalgia might be to reduce its effect on notions of history. Another is the likelihood that

8 See also the memorable scene concerning John Wayne's teeth—possibly a deliberate echo of Erdrich's mention of the "horizon" of Wayne's smile—in the book's film adaptation, *Smoke Signals* (Eyre, 1998) (also noted in LaRocque 150).

nostalgia in the Western tends to be imperialistic (Abel 87), and that the West now needs to be won “from the shady forces of illusion and fantasy” (Evans 408). Although David H. Evans argues that such “forces” are to some extent straw men in other revisionist Westerns (408), I find few replications of the problems of the Western in *Green Grass, Running Water*. By refusing to treat John Wayne nostalgically through history or pseudo-history, but rather through a genuinely *alternative* fantasy (I mean as a subversive construction), King minimizes the effect of generic star power on his readers, though some of his Western-watching characters (most importantly Lionel) are under that influence.

When King fantasizes about the death of John Wayne, he is thinking less of the man born Marion Morrison and more of his persona—and, in fact, as much a *type* as a *trope* that appears often in narratives of stardom. To want to see a celebrity knocked off his high horse is a cliché of popular culture that partly explains these rise-and-fall narratives. Consider the relatively recent *Birdman* (Iñárritu, 2014), the exemplary *Sunset Boulevard* (Wilder, 1950), and of course some of the nine films in which the John Wayne character dies, perhaps most importantly *The Shootist* (Siegel, 1976), the last of his career. In the latter two examples, the star is synecdoche for an era, and the narrative comments on history. At other times, the star is allegorical, standing in for a morally charged historical figure, as happens in *Citizen Kane* (Welles, 1941). The deep and abiding problem mentioned earlier is that history and popular culture are not separate, nor are the person and persona as neatly divisible as even the stars themselves might hope: *The Shootist* refers semi-autobiographically to the imminent death of the actual man. When celebrities perform deaths while their own deaths are imminent, Thomas H. Kane calls it “automortography” (410), a form of self-promotion that enables stars to set some of the terms of memorialization. It’s what some people do when they know that their compulsively followed dramas as celebrities—as public personas—give them the status of historical figures too.

John Wayne had that status, and it is almost certainly one of the main reasons why King chose to kill him fictionally at the hands of the “Indians” in a movie—a magic-realist reversal of the usual fate when cowboys meet “Indians” in Westerns. King could have chosen to re-enact the scene of George Armstrong Custer’s death at the Battle of the Little Bighorn, as

in the movie *Little Big Man* (Penn, 1970), but he chose Wayne. The only historicity he acknowledges in Wayne is that of the public persona; he alludes to how John Wayne movies might have been marketed to kids (214), and he alludes to real John Wayne movies such as *Stagecoach*, *Hondo*, and *The Searchers* (Ford, 1939; Farrow, 1953; Ford, 1956). In his work on King, Brian Johnson is wary of “collaps[ing] history into geography” (30), as Marshall McLuhan allegedly does, and in parallel I am wary of collapsing history into popular culture. For the character Professor Alberta Frank in *Green Grass, Running Water*, “[t]eaching Western history was trial enough without having to watch what the movie makers had made out of it” (214). Partly because of the movie within the novel, Johnson calls for more critical attention to the mass media in *Green Grass, Running Water*, which “is most explicitly engaged in questioning the effects of Western technology and electric media on Native subjectivity and culture” (28). In 2012, King wrote in his non-fictional book *The Inconvenient Indian* that “film, in all its forms, has been the only place where most North Americans have seen Indians” (xv). That he chose Wayne suggests that non-Native popular culture is the real enemy of Native American, First Nations, and Métis cultures, partly because it influences how we understand history and even becomes mistaken for history.

John Wayne has power as a historical figure in and out of his movies, and he is arguably even more historically important than Custer and many other leaders, simply because of star power (which is not to say that many leaders do not have their own star power). His historical airs are partly contrived, of course; the film scholar Edward Buscombe shows that Wayne’s typical costumes are realistic and help him to project a sense of historical authenticity (9, 78). Slotkin calls him the “supreme example” (*Gunfighter* 243) of an “icon of authenticity” (242), one who was given a congressional medal “honoring him as the embodiment of American military heroism—although he had never served a day in uniform” (243). In one film, the collaboratively directed 1962 epic *How the West Was Won*, he even plays a major historical figure, to my surprise not a Confederate but the Union Army general William Tecumseh Sherman, whose middle name “Tecumseh” ironically refers to the famous Shawnee chief who fought against American soldiers and temporarily allied with the British in the War of 1812. But outside the diegesis, Wayne is historically

significant too. Russell Meeuf states that “Wayne’s international drawing power and the transnational appeal of his body in action helped circulate Hollywood globally in the 1950s” (6). Meeuf also writes that “[a]s movie audiences around the world experienced the often-disturbing social and economic changes of capitalism becoming increasingly global, as well as pressure to conform to a particular form of Western modernity, Wayne was the world’s most popular movie star, offering an appealing image of modern manhood managing those social changes” (4). Meeuf convincingly demonstrates the range of Wayne’s global appeal, finding examples from Germany, Australia, Afghanistan, Peru, and even Japan and the Soviet bloc (5). He also quotes assertions about the Western’s popularity in France, Italy, and Northern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) (70). Nowhere is Canada mentioned, but Canada’s proximity to the United States and the centrality of American pop culture on Canadian screens suggest that John Wayne would be at least as well-known here as in other countries. By promoting Hollywood as synecdoche for the United States when American superpower was growing, and as Hollywood’s and perhaps the world’s most popular star of his generation, John Wayne became a special target of critique.

He is highly political, obviously, and King has reason, given his political differences from Wayne, to be critical of him. Wayne was a Republican “supporter of Joe McCarthy, Richard Nixon, and the Vietnam War” (Newman 158) and “came to symbolize hard-line conservative politics of the 1960s and 1970s” (Meeuf 2), thereby polarizing his reception, according to Meeuf, as either “a necessary but benevolent patriarchal and national authority, or . . . a racist, sexist totalitarian who represented all of U.S. culture’s oppressive past” (2). Wayne’s persona could be as hard and even “indomitable” (Wills 17) as the tank that Phillips relates to him in the poem that opens this essay. Nearer to the liberal end of the spectrum, Thomas King ran as “Tom King” in 2007 as a parliamentary candidate for the New Democratic Party of Canada, which was once a socialist party and is now left-leaning but centrist. How serious he was as a politician remains a question for me, partly because he seems to imply a used-car salesmanship joke in the video in which he sells himself as a candidate (“NDP”), and partly because *The Inconvenient Indian* is extraordinarily cynical compared to the false “monumental optimism” (King,

“Interview”) of King’s novels, nowhere more so than in its commentary on federal politics. Regardless, he is in many ways opposite to Wayne on the political spectrum, and he presumably sees Wayne as a cowboy in something other than a white hat.

The differing views of Wayne, however, are not as racialized as one might expect in the context of King, a writer of Cherokee, Greek, and Swiss-German descent whose primary interest as a writer is the racial politics related to his Indigenous heritage. Greg Bechtel argues that most critics are “reductive” (205) in their interpretations of *Green Grass, Running Water* and perpetuate a “ ‘Whites’ versus ‘Indians’ ” (206) mentality that does not perfectly reflect a novel in which, for example, some of the enemies of “Indians” are people who could identify as “Indian.” And the novel aligns with JoEllen Shively’s small study of Indigenous and white viewers’ responses to *The Searchers*, which revealed that many Indigenous viewers really like John Wayne movies, especially Wayne’s “toughness” (731) in them; they don’t interpret it as “totalitarian.”⁹ King’s character Eli Stands Alone in *Green Grass, Running Water* also thinks that “he liked Westerns. It was like . . . eating potato chips. They weren’t good for you, but no one said they were” (163). Eli’s opinion is not impossible to find among Indigenous people in the real world either (LaRocque 138; Miller 281; “Zacharias Kunuk Reimagines”) In contrast with the study done on the reservation, however, Shively’s study with Indigenous college students revealed that her viewers did not like John Wayne and associated his character with interview-based comments they perceived as racist (732). Wayne’s notorious *Playboy* interview and his racism were criticized again recently by Mi’kmaw filmmaker Jeff Barnaby in a series of tweets (@tripgore) in 2018 and especially around 20 February 2019. King, university-educated like Barnaby and a professor for most of his career, has more in common with the Indigenous college students—but his residence in Canada is not a preference that means the “U.S. culture’s oppressive past” is the main concern of his politics. King refers to the “political push-pull” (“Interview”)

9 I thank Morgen Mills for pointing out that Indigenous and non-American viewers could appreciate Wayne’s “toughness” as resilience (a hard-earned and admirable trait, perhaps especially for oppressed people), without necessarily agreeing with the goals that the toughness might serve. Notably, too, many viewers might enjoy Wayne’s acting without liking his off-screen comments.

of his national identities; not only his identities but also his politics are transnational, and he is as critical of Canada as he is of the United States in *The Inconvenient Indian*, pointing to the complex histories of mutual antagonism between Indigenous peoples and colonial governments in addition to the oppressive influence of the newcomers.

Mixing “Cowboys and Indians”

I want to digress briefly into a related, important example in the work of the poet Garry Gottfriedson, who has a similarly complex and ultimately ambivalent critique of the Western in his 2006 book *Whiskey Bullets: Cowboy and Indian Heritage Poems*. Gottfriedson, who has Okanagan (Sqilxw), Shuswap (Secwepemc), and Cree (Nêhiyaw) ancestry (Schneider and Gottfriedson 138), has been a Shuswap language teacher and rancher. His ranching background is key to his partial identification with the figure of the cowboy.¹⁰ However, he also recognizes the cowboy as a figure with a colonial view of the West and of its original inhabitants. His shifting persona says at one point,

I ponder roping
a painted Indian on canvas
.....
I am the cowboy artist
who gazes at Indian art (54)

Here Gottfriedson associates a cowboy “gaze” with cultural appropriation and the dehumanization of “roping / a painted Indian” as if he were a cow, horse, or buffalo. Later in *Whiskey Bullets*, however, he offers a reconciling view: “cowboys and Indians / are the same” (66); “their love is geometry: / elements at right angles & triangles” (83). But this middle view is also offset by an Indigenous, decolonial view:

10 See also Morgan Baillargeon and Leslie Tepper’s *Legends of Our Times: Native Cowboy Life* (1998) (qtd. in LaRocque 150), which helps to explain Indigenous views of the cowboy in relation to ranching, rodeo, and horses, among other things.

the Indian smiles with crowned teeth,
You have to go, Babe.
so the cowboy packs
his rig . . . (36)

“Pack[ing] his rig” to leave is a strict interpretation of decolonization, but decolonization is probably not quite what Gottfriedson had in mind here. Rather, the three perspectives that I discern in *Whiskey Bullets* are, like King’s, directed at a specific colonial mentality that transmits through popular culture. In “Cowboy Up,” Gottfriedson’s persona claims to be “resistant / to Hollywood and reality tv” (*Whiskey* 60). In the words of reviewer Connie Brim: “[R]eplacing the lone, silent, white cowboy are Aboriginal cowboys who crack the whip, observe council politics, lecture on alternative histories, participate in rodeos, speak of love, and write poetry” (“Review”). The “alternative histories” and alternative political frameworks of “council politics” jump out at me here. Gottfriedson seems to see the cowboy as a colonial figure while recognizing that many Indigenous people seek decolonization or are engaged in anti-colonial resistance, in tandem with their seeking reconciliation, possibly “the best of all worlds” (“Acknowledgements,” *Whiskey*).

While Gottfriedson’s persona and King’s character Eli are circumspect about the Western’s appeal, Eli’s nephew Lionel Red Dog in *Green Grass, Running Water* is enthusiastic about John Wayne. One of the main characters in *Green Grass, Running Water*, Lionel is a TV salesman whose aunt Norma tells him, “I would sometimes think you were white” (7). Among scholars, Brian Johnson states that Lionel is “complicit in his own oppression” (39); Dee Horne calls him a “mimic” (“To Know”). Lionel identifies with Wayne as fans often do with movie stars. Contrary to his cousin Charlie Looking Bear’s view of Wayne as a reprehensible killer, Lionel—at the even younger age of six—“knew what he wanted to be. John Wayne. Not the actor, but the character. Not the man, but the hero. . . . The John Wayne who saved stagecoaches and wagon trains from Indian attacks” (241). Lionel’s father suggests that he “keep his options open”: “We got a lot of famous men and women, too. Warriors, chiefs, councillors, diplomats, spiritual leaders, healers” (241). But Lionel is set on John Wayne, partly because he has been convinced by advertising aimed at children; King

writes that “[o]ne of the cereal companies offered a free John Wayne ring for three boxtops and fifty cents handling charge” (214). Later in life, however, Lionel gets a fringed leather jacket from four strangers (to him) on his birthday that makes him “look a little like John Wayne” (303)—though Wayne’s comparatively realistic costuming means that “John Wayne” here signifies any generic cowboy. Lionel himself thinks he looks less like his uncle Portland Looking Bear and “more like John Wayne” (318). At one point, Lionel makes the healthy decision to walk to work instead of driving: “it would be a good way to start the day, a good way to start his new life. . . . That’s what John Wayne would do” (243).

Here, King seems to recognize a positive aspect of fandom, but the movie itself to which he alludes necessarily returns an interpretation to ambivalence. In the 1953 movie *Hondo*, “a good way” is a catchphrase of the main character, Hondo, played by Wayne. Hondo embodies traditionally American and libertarian values such as self-reliance, that keyword of Ralph Waldo Emerson and ideal of most Westerns, but Hondo’s ethics are suspect, and his admiration of self-reliant beings occasions explanation only in circumstances involving the dog Sam and the Apache. When Angie (Geraldine Page) wants to feed his dog, Sam, he refuses because he is proud of the dog’s self-reliance; when she offers Hondo the food for Sam, he says, “No ma’am. I don’t feed him either. Sam’s independent. I want him to stay that way. It’s a good way.” Midway through the film, the Apache kill Sam, but we never see Hondo show grief. Much later, as the pursuing Apache are repelled and the pursued whites comment on the imminent arrival of major reinforcements for the cavalry, Hondo’s old friend Buffalo Baker (Ward Bond) says, “That’ll be the end of the Apache.” “Yeah,” says Hondo, typically stoic. “The end of a way of life. Too bad—it’s a good way.” Hondo seems to have character here; Robert Pippin speculates that Wayne is so effective at portraying “great integrity” (243) that most viewers ignore his persona’s racism. The repetition of Hondo’s catchphrase means he *is* comparing “the Apache” and the dog. This comparison might not be so negative given his stated respect for both, but—epitomizing so many North American and Western attitudes—he is nostalgic, not remorseful.

Probably only King, in his humorist guise, would try to find something funny in this scene, if in fact he was thinking of it while writing *Green Grass, Running Water*. In his novel, King introduces the Dead

Dog Café (108), which he later parlayed into CBC Radio's *Dead Dog Café Comedy Hour*, which ran to eighty-five episodes between 1997 and 2000. Michael Enright describes the series as "irreverent, political and sometimes breathtakingly politically incorrect. And funny" ("Dead"). Arnold E. Davidson, Priscilla L. Walton, and Jennifer Andrews describe it in *Border Crossings* (2003) as "a show that deliberately highlights the ludicrousness of clinging to reductive racial stereotypes that don't allow for alternatives" (112). On the show, King plays himself, Tom, alongside characters Jasper Friendly Bear (Floyd Favel) and Gracie Heavyhand (Edna Rain), the latter of whom manages the café-cum-broadcasting studio. One of the show's running jokes is that Louis Riel would appear as a special guest (e.g., as "a famous Indian" in the first episode); however, its infamous joke is that the café serves puppy stew. In the second episode, Tom worries about Gracie's plans to "butcher a puppy on a radio show," and she relativizes about eating one kind of meat and not another. The joke cannot or should not be separated from the show's commentary on the Western; Gracie also relativizes about sentencing in the criminal justice system in the "Trust Tonto" segment of the show, which Jasper introduces by playing some cavalry music that might be heard in a Western. Jasper claims that the Lone Ranger cannot be trusted because he is a white man in a mask, a man who rides around the West to make the world "safe for democracy and multinational corporations." Speaking for Tonto, Gracie then remarks on a problem common throughout North America: that "Natives get tougher sentences for the same crimes as whites" and outnumber whites in prison. In this context, Jasper asserts again that Louis Riel is alive, indirectly raising the question of the fairness of Riel's death sentence in 1885 following the North-West Resistance. King alludes to dead dogs to criticize the low value placed by the dominant culture on the lives of Indians—and, in fact, their dehumanization. No people have ever been as harmless as puppies, but King's purpose is to accentuate relative harms, as he does by comparing figures and arguing in *The Inconvenient Indian* that white settlers "were considerably more successful at massacre" (5) than Indigenous peoples were.

King's Mass-Mediated Celebrity

The controversies and hijinks of *The Dead Dog Café Comedy Hour* helped King to establish a degree of celebrity in the mass media, and this celebrity is theoretically a type of power to be used against the ghost of John Wayne—or, more accurately, the longevity of Wayne's persona and views. *The Dead Dog Café* had an “average weekly audience of nearly one hundred thousand CBC listeners” (Flaherty 313). As Davidson, Walton, and Andrews argue, King's popularity is partly the result of his challenges to the American-Canadian border (11, 13), and to the accessibility of his work beyond “the book-buying public” (97). The fictional killing of John Wayne is one such challenge. A related challenge to borders is broadcasting. King writes in *The Truth about Stories* (2003) that “instead of waiting for you [non-Indigenous people] to come to us, as we have in the past, written literature has allowed us to come to you” (114). Radio and other mass media extend this rapprochement. Although “[t]he elevation to celebrity status for King's Native characters [such as Portland in *Green Grass, Running Water*] requires the submission to commodity status” (Rodness), and although King himself has had to resist being stereotyped as Cherokee, American, or Canadian in interviews, the mass media are for King an opportunity to play with stereotypes and thereby influence culture. Brian Johnson explains that “*The Dead Dog Café* not only affords King the opportunity to parody and contest stereotypical representations of Natives for a mass popular audience, it also enables him to do so orally, and thus to revitalize and reinvent oral traditions in a non-traditional medium” (44). King uses the mass media to be simultaneously creative, resistant, comic, and promotional of his messages and himself.

Davidson, Walton, and Andrews add that “King himself is a newsworthy figure, who does not simply write books, but also is a frequent presence on radio programs, an occasional actor, and a sometimes critic” (76–7). His connection to the “mass public audience” and his status as a public intellectual (e.g., in his Massey Lectures in 2003, which became *The Truth about Stories*) mean that he has a status that can resist celebrity on his own terms—not as an entertainer among those who “ceased being a people and somehow became performers in an Aboriginal minstrel show for White North America” (*Truth about Stories* 68). He writes in *The*

Inconvenient Indian about the “public face” (153) of the American Indian Movement, recognizing the disproportionate effect of publicity on the public’s understanding of which movements are influential. In the context of his own activism, King jokes that “Hollywood might even make a movie about us. I wonder who they’d get to play me” (144). Although he is the underdog in a metaphoric battle against John Wayne, he has star power to fight star power—fire with fire—at least in Canada.¹¹

As celebrities tend to do, King sometimes engages in grandstanding, but ironically. Rather than insinuate himself into the circles of people who are much more widely recognized, he plays with an invocation of religious significance to suggest his ambition, as other Canadian literary celebrities have done (Deshaye, *Metaphor* 10, 28, 61). He invokes for example the religious figure of Coyote and associates himself with the trickster spirit. Coyote is “good and bad, creator and disrupter” (Davidson, Walton, and Andrews 80), a force of chaos and shaper of narratives. King himself is not only a writer but also a photographer, and one of his series of portraits of Indigenous writers is a self-portrait with a taxidermied coyote. In the photograph, the coyote is stretching up as if to howl or bark, and its tongue ripples between its open jaws. King is leaning in and looking surprised, positioned so that the coyote’s tongue is at his earlobe, as if the canine were whispering to him or licking his ear. According to Davidson, Walton, and Andrews, “[t]he photograph plays tricks with the eye by aligning King with the coyote in his own visual form of trickster discourse” (100). King’s ludic propensity has a satirical bite when he compares the Christian God to Coyote in a scene from *Green Grass, Running Water*. Faye Hammill summarizes it like so: “One of Coyote’s dreams is about a dog, but the dream gets loose, reverses its name, and proclaims itself

11 His views remain relevant when Conrad Black, arguably another public intellectual and certainly a figure of celebrity in the national media that he helped to expand, still feels justified in writing that pre-contact “Indian society was not in itself worthy of integral conservation, nor was its dilution a suitable subject for great lamentations” (9). Neither Black nor King are sentimental or overly idealistic about pre-contact “Indians,” but King decries Black’s sort of smug and condescending dismissiveness of “Indians,” a dismissiveness that remains problematic for First Nations even in the era of the Idle No More movement, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. Black’s *Rise to Greatness* (2014) is unapologetically a history of great white men—one whose impressive scope is diminished by its focus on winners in war and politics, and whose integrity is deeply suspect because of its omissions, erasures, and rationalizing of cultural genocide.

GOD; subsequently, GOD's attempt to rename and reclassify everything in Canada according to a Christian worldview is counteracted by a group of shape-shifting Indigenous deities" (1). On the one hand, King's comedy equalizes Christian and Indigenous traditions while noting the spiritual significance of non-human animals for Indians. On the other, if King had *Hondo* in mind, then he is being wickedly funny in killing off Wayne alongside God.

King doesn't apologize, either, when he kills John Wayne. For someone who campaigned for an erstwhile socialist party in Canada, his implied author is remarkably conservative in his embrace of retributive justice at the moment when magic realism meets realism in this novel—quite different from in the realist sections, where his Indigenous characters refuse to engage in violence. Let me set the stage, which is "Buffalo" Bill Bursum's audio-video store, where Lionel's cousin Charlie has come to talk about jobs and money; Bursum is playing the John Wayne movie on his wall of TVs, the TVs set up to look like a map of the country. Throughout the novel the only program on TV is this very Western (177, 220), a fictional movie called *The Mysterious Warrior*, which Bursum thinks of as "[t]he best Western of them all. John Wayne, Richard Widmark, Maureen O'Hara. All the biggies" (188).¹² The realist and magic-realist sections of the novel finally combine when the aforementioned "group of shape-shifting Indigenous deities" enter into *The Mysterious Warrior* and act out an alternate ending. These deities name themselves after characters in "imperial master-narratives" (Davidson, Walton, and Andrews 88) that have race as a major theme: Hawkeye, Ishmael, Robinson Crusoe, and the Lone Ranger—all characters "paired with indigenous, colonized sidekicks" (Wyile, "Trust Tonto" 115). Incidentally, Hawkeye and the Lone Ranger affirm Bill's opinion by saying, rather too innocently, it's also their "favorite" (302) movie. King bases his movie on a fictional novel mentioned in his own novel in which a "stagecoach was attacked by Indians led by the most notorious Indian in the territory, the Mysterious Warrior" (162), a warrior who kidnaps a young woman from the stagecoach. The plot echoes such

12 Johannes Fehrle notices that, in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969), the kidnapped protagonist is in a cage designed as a typical American apartment, in which "[t]here was a picture of one cowboy killing another pasted to the television tube" (Vonnegut qtd. in Fehrle 9)—a possible source for King's scenes in which the only thing on TV is the same old Western.

John Wayne films as *Stagecoach* and *The Searchers*. Whereas the battle scenes of these real movies are grim indeed, in *The Mysterious Warrior* “Hawkeye, Ishmael, Robinson Crusoe, and the Lone Ranger [are] smiling and laughing and waving their lances as the rest of the Indians flashed across the river to where the soldiers lay cowering behind some logs” (221). King’s vengeance against the American soldiers is joyful here, not in the slightest remorseful—and why should it be, given that the historical reality of oppression is so much worse than the fantasy of surviving it without trauma?

The death scene’s joyfulness dissipates quickly, however. Initially embarrassed to see his father, fictional B-list movie star Portland Looking Bear, onscreen and about to lose to John Wayne, Charlie starts to identify with him as it becomes apparent that the four deities have “fixed” (317) the movie. They do so by erasing the cavalry that came to the rescue of Wayne and his party: “There at full charge, hundreds of soldiers in bright blue uniforms with gold buttons and sashes and stripes, blue-eyed and rosy-cheeked, came over the last rise. And disappeared. Just like that” (321).¹³ Outnumbered and missing most shots, John Wayne and Richard Widmark lose the fight. King describes it as follows:

John Wayne looked down and stared stupidly at the arrow in his thigh, shaking his head in amazement and disbelief as two bullets ripped through his chest and out the back of his jacket. Richard Widmark collapsed facedown in the sand, his hands clutching at an arrow buried in his throat.

“Jesus!” said Bursum, and stabbed the remote. . . .

Charlie had his hands out of his pockets, his fists clenched, keeping time to the singing [of the four deities]. His lips were pulled back from his teeth, and his eyes flashed as he watched his father flow through the soldiers like a flood.

“Get ‘em, Dad,” he hissed.

13 A parallel appears in King’s later novel *Truth & Bright Water* (1999) when the artist Monroe Swimmer explains that he dealt with the erasure of Indians from the landscape by painting them back into classic images.

“Yahoo!” shouts Coyote.

And then the movie ended and the credits rolled to black and all the screens ran to static. (322)

Charlie’s intense reaction is cathartic, a vicarious release of his frustrations with the popular culture of the Western that costumed his father in “a large rubber nose” (217) to suit a stereotype, and that directed him to perform his own defeat in Western after Western. As Herb Wyile observes, King turns some whites into literalized “cartoon characters” (“Trust Tonto” 112) as a revenge against Indigenous stereotyping. And the fantasy is not only that the “Indians” had beaten back and humiliated the cowboys and the colonists. It’s also that they had finally been represented as succeeding—no “tragedy or doom” (Cox 220).¹⁴ Charlie is a successful lawyer but realizes that he, like his father, had to sell out for success. Although Lionel registers vague apprehension when his idol dies (322), he later renews his affiliations with his Blackfoot family by going to a Sun Dance. The alternate ending of *The Mysterious Warrior* seems to inspire Lionel to be more involved in tradition, and yet there can be no full recovery of pre-colonial, pre-modern Indigenous ways. Shively argues that “[w]hat makes Westerns meaningful to Indians [and probably anyone from the West] is the fantasy of being free and independent like the cowboy and the familiarity of the landscape or setting” (729), whereas anglophone settlers enjoy Westerns as “primitive myths” (729) that affirm that colonization was good.¹⁵ King disputes the historical validity of the “myths” and *partly* aligns with Indigenous viewers who want their “fantasy.”

King argues insistently that a major problem in the majority’s view of First Nations and Native Americans is that the “Indian” remains a “primitive” figure—not a modern and complex figure but a singular reductive

14 The inversion is in contrast with the problem in non-Indigenous literature that “dead Indians, even whole extinct tribes, work as well as or better than ‘live,’ contemporary Indians” (Fee, “Romantic” 16).

15 The identification of “Indians” with cowboys continues today beyond literature. A recent article in *The Walrus* includes Birthe Piontek’s large photograph of Tsilhqot’in chief Roger William wearing a cowboy hat and fringed buckskin jacket against a backdrop of mountains in British Columbia, the caption reading “Cowboy and Indian” (Kopecky 31). Later in the piece, Arno Kopecky writes: “Modern Tsilhqot’in, to put it crudely, are both cowboys and Indians. They depend on moose and salmon as much as on the cattle they ranch. William, a rodeo champ in his youth, wears a black Stetson and never leaves home without a drum” (33).

figure “trapped in a state of stasis” (*Inconvenient* 78). The alternate ending of *The Mysterious Warrior* represents King’s entry into the world of film and of mass media, which he wants to complicate and Indigenize; “King . . . remains cautiously optimistic that, like the book, electric mass media can . . . accurately reflect divergent cultural perspectives” (Johnson 43). Active in such mass media as the Internet, the hundreds of Indigenous nations in Canada and the United States can add perspective to the problematic view by sidestepping the cultural gatekeepers of Hollywood movies.¹⁶

Canadians Reading American Westerns

Andrews and Walton explain that “[t]he counter-narratives or alternative visions within King’s texts also perform a political purpose,” which is “cultural resistance to the dominance of nation” (609); elsewhere, they call these narratives “alterna(rra)tives” (Davidson, Walton, and Andrews 87).¹⁷ Despite King’s justified resistance to this “dominance,” and “the larger issue of the uneasy place of Native writers in ‘Canadian’ culture” (Wyile, “Trust Tonto” 122), I want to conclude this section by thinking about how the death of John Wayne in *Green Grass, Running Water* encourages Canadians to read American Westerns. Admittedly, these national categories are impositions on King; he writes in his book *The Truth about Stories* that “the border doesn’t mean that much to the majority of Native people in either country. It is, after all, a figment of someone else’s imagination” (102). It is also likely that he knew he was writing his novel at a time when “many Americans [had recently] been surprised and hurt by reports in the media of or by personally experiencing anti-Americanism on the part of Canadians” (B. Daniels, 87). Whether or not Americans and Canadians generally interpret King as Canadian, university teachers

16 The big, colourful guide to the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts and Denver Art Museum joint exhibit *Once upon a Time . . . The Western*, by Mary-Dailey Desmarais and Thomas Brent Smith (2017), includes three illustrations in coloured pencil by an unknown Cheyenne artist, ca. 1875–6. They depict Indigenous people in battle. In two cases, an Indigenous man on horseback is attacking a man on foot, identifiable at least in the first case (fig. 80 in the guide) as a cowboy, with hat and holstered pistol. The illustrations are on ledger paper whose ledger lines give the impression of comic-book panels. Although they are not a mass-mediated alternative to the history written in the Western, they are suggestive of it; they are also at least another example of Indigenous visions of their own power.

17 For similar wordplay but with more emphasis on “Native,” see Drew Hayden Taylor’s play *alterNatives* (1999).

in Canada have Canadianized *Green Grass, Running Water* such that it is the second-most popular text by an Indigenous writer in English literature courses in Canada (Fagan and McKegney 36). As both “Tom” and “Thomas King,” now a star to some degree in Canadian literary circles if not in politics, King realizes that his large readership now draws on the majority—mostly non-Indigenous people, most of whom identify as Canadian or American. He could not have been ignorant of the political risk of his novel, and in fact he might also have foreseen that its “Canadian” objection to American influence would prompt self-reflective readers to consider the parallel of Indigenous objections to Canadian influence.

Margaret Atwood had already done so in *Survival* (1972) when she wrote that “white Canadian identification with the Indian-as-victim may conceal a syllogism something like this: ‘We are to the Americans as the Indians are to us’ ” (100). Although Atwood is not writing in the context of the Western, her identification with the “Indian-as-victim” is a major problem of the Western. John Wayne’s Hondo, “part Indian,” represents a fantasy of guiltless colonial Indigenization. That the cowboy in the Western thinks he can Indigenize himself without also victimizing himself (or caring much about others) is an assimilation-without-consequences idea. If Atwood’s suggestion applies to the Canadian Western, then one implication is that the cowboy here is *doubly* identified with the “Indian”—but is perhaps not much more sympathetic. Atwood does not describe the cowboy as such in her poem “Backdrop Addresses Cowboy” (1968), which I address in the chapter on postmodern Westerns, probably because she was thinking of the Western as exclusively an American genre, and her nationalism was hiding (even from herself) the Canadian complicity that, in *Literary Land Claims* (2015), Margery Fee discovers in Atwood and her precursor Northrop Frye’s nationalist tracts (6–7).

To many Canadians, the dominant nation is the United States, and they are concerned about the economic pressure of “free trade” and the supply side of the cultural globalization that I have already mentioned. “[T]he spirit of manifest destiny became even more chilling to a small nation” (B. Daniels 90) as Canadians from the nineteenth century to the present witnessed the United States use force on other small nations abroad and on American soil. Some Canadians resent the “American indifference” (91) to Canada when Canada cannot afford to be indifferent

to its southern neighbour. According to the self-described “American-Canadian” historian Bruce C. Daniels, “Canadians have developed an increasing tendency to overstate problems and defects in American society” (86, 92), a questionable behaviour (one of which I am sometimes guilty) given that many Americans (including my friends and colleagues) are at work on those problems and defects; one might argue that King, born in California and holding a PhD from the University of Utah (Davidson, Walton, and Andrews 5), is one such “American” critic—one to whom I look for guidance when trying to understand my own position as non-Indigenous and Canadian, and the extent of my own openness to the ideology of the Western.

Rereading the Canadian Westerns published after the Canadian centennial in 1967 but before *Green Grass, Running Water* in 1993, I note that an American historical figure—the main character—is always killed. (I am only including books that signal the genre in obvious ways.) There are only three that end with a dead American historical figure that I know of in this time frame (the true resurgence of the Western coming after King): Michael Ondaatje’s *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970), bpNichol’s *The True Eventual Story of Billy the Kid* (1970), and Paulette Jiles’s *The Jesse James Poems* (1988). There is at least one further example in Canadian Westerns on film, William A. Graham’s *Harry Tracy, Desperado* (1982). Although these are small numbers and would be dwarfed by the number of American Westerns that focus on the death of an American historical figure, in the comparatively small field of Canadian literary production it is notable. The scene of the “Indians” killing John Wayne in *Green Grass, Running Water* also makes me wonder if the Western in Canada can teach us something about the interest in dead celebrities in the work of Canadian poets such as Ondaatje, Gwendolyn MacEwen, and Irving Layton (Deshaye, *Metaphor*, chs. 7 and 10). For Layton and Ondaatje, the examples are almost always American; many of their texts were published in the 1970s, when nationalistic feeling was strong in Canada, which partly accounts for the paranoia about American cultural imperialism or colonialism. So, these Canadian books that focus so much on Jesse James,

Billy the Kid, and John Wayne seem to be part of a general commentary, not only a generic precedent.¹⁸

Because these figures are not purely fictional, these books are often read as metahistorical; however, King's novel encourages us to read them as critiques of popular culture instead of history. My view here is that King's vision of John Wayne re-frames Canadian Westerns about Billy the Kid and Jesse James *as a collective fantasy of the death of American celebrity*—or at least an attempted subversion of American pop-cultural influence. The killing of John Wayne in *Green Grass, Running Water* is hardly the restorative justice of the stereotypical leftist Canadian way; it is retributive—but *creative, fantastic, not real*. King recognizes John Wayne and the American Western as pop-cultural factors in a representational stigma that perpetuates historical losses. Partly through King, the American Western in Canadian literature is rewritten to adjust popular culture's negative effect on history, ultimately to encourage "Indians" not to leave it to the cowboys.

John Wayne vs. Gabriel Dumont (and Louis Riel)

What figure stands up to Wayne now, given that King works against the myth of the violent hero through the passive resistance of his character Eli, who refuses to leave his home in the path of environmentally destructive development? Is there an "Indian" hero who fits into this myth and the bigger myth of the West—that of the open range, open to cowboys who need only be stoic in defiance of the wilderness and its occasional manifestation in the "Indian"? The Métis painter and scholar David Garneau, in a 2015 issue of *Geist*, published an illustrative painting entitled *Cross (Ad)dressing* that depicts two men.¹⁹ Slightly closer to the viewer but facing away is a chief in headdress, over whose shoulder we see a cowboy in his cowboy hat. The cowboy and "Indian" share a thought bubble that asks their unspoken mutual question: "Métis?" The implication is that the fig-

18 For additional recent examples that consider the real or symbolic deaths of American historical figures who are also celebrities, see Natalee Caple's *In Calamity's Wake* (2013) and Alix Hawley's *All True Not a Lie in It* (2015).

19 *Geist* entitled the painting *Cross Addressing*, but Garneau in an email to me on 30 July 2019 stated that it is *Cross (Ad)dressing*. Garneau, a Métis professor and painter at the University of Regina, has since the late 1990s painted many canvases in response to the Western.

ure who bridges the gap between the cowboy and the “Indian” is the Métis, the same occupant of the Red River mentioned in the Lomax-McCurry version of the classic tune “Home on the Range”:

The red man was pressed from this part of the West
He’s likely no more to return,
To the banks of Red River where seldom if ever
Their flickering campfires burn. (qtd. in Catherine Cooper 171)

Gabriel Dumont is such a figure: the Métis leader, warrior, and ally of Louis Riel who called up Riel from exile in Montana and who then himself fled into the United States after Riel’s hanging; the “Hero of the Half-breed Rebellion” (Barnholden 24) recruited by Buffalo Bill during his time in the United States; the historical figure recently reoriented to the front of the stage by the director Mani Soleymanlou in the multi-authored *Gabriel Dumont’s Wild West Show* of 2017/2021 (Dalpé et al.). Dumont—whom Garneau has painted alongside Riel in his *How the West Was . . .* (1998–2008) series—was a rebel but tactically respected the law when it was in his interest: he was alleged to have travelled with Buffalo Bill to tour in Europe, but he claimed to have refused to go because he did not yet have his amnesty (Dumont 56). Despite his exploits and the revival of interest in him after *Gabriel Dumont’s Wild West Show*, he remains under-recognized outside of Saskatchewan and Manitoba.²⁰ *Gabriel Dumont’s Wild West Show*, however, comments on the Western more directly than anything about Riel that I have found. In fact, the stage directions in *Gabriel Dumont’s Wild West Show* suggest that Dumont’s first words in the play should be spoken “à la Eastwood” (11), another alternative to Wayne.

20 Instead of Dumont, the figure who has captured the popular and national imagination sufficiently to stand up to John Wayne is more likely Riel, the Métis politician whose roles in the Red River Rebellion and the establishment of the province of Manitoba, his exile in the United States, and his eventual hanging qualify him as an outlaw too. Better yet, he, too, is clearly an outlaw-lawman, the iconic figure who straddles the border or rides both horses. Northrop Frye writes, “Canada has not had, strictly speaking, an Indian war: there has been much less of the ‘another redskin bit the dust’ feeling in our historical imagination, and only Riel remains to haunt the later period of it” (“Conclusion” 224). As I footnoted earlier in this chapter, sections on Riel (fictionalized by Frank Davey) are in chapter 5.

Taking a cue from *Green Grass, Running Water*, *Gabriel Dumont's Wild West Show* interrogates the effect of popular culture on history. It does not absolve itself from this problem; the play is also self-conscious about its own salesmanship and inauthenticity, displaying a poster that reads "1-888-NARRATION CANADIENNE" (9) shortly before one of its characters amusingly assures us: "Hover and Séguin Epic Narratives and Storytelling is recognized by the department of Canadian Heritage and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency" (9). Such self-reflection is important, because in a multi-authored, multicultural play about Métis heroes it is possible to indulge in the idealization of what Chelsea Vowel calls "the myth of Métissage," or mixedness/hybridity, which is related to what she describes as "the myth of authenticity" (43, 165).²¹ In Canada, it is a particularly dangerous myth if it encourages Canadians to absolve themselves of responsibility for colonization because multiculturalism supposedly solved that problem (43). But *Gabriel Dumont's Wild West Show* helps remind us that problems of colonization are still with us, as in the striking image of residential schools that appears near the end of the play (and which I consider in more detail below). And so the play also recaps the history of surveying the West, the Métis resistance to this surveying and the resulting dispossessions, the *Manitoba Act* (1870), Riel's relationship with Dumont (in act 1, parts 2 and 3), and the Battles of Duck Lake and Batoche—and the tragic consequences—with all the main historical figures cast as characters (in acts 2 and 3). It also highlights several women's voices—for example, that of Madeleine Dumont—to counteract the masculinity of written history.

In fact, near the end, Buffalo Bill himself finally appears on stage to comment on popular culture and history—and he is played, if I am reading the typescript correctly, by the same woman cast as Madeleine

21 One of the earliest Canadian Westerns to deal with hybridity at length is the Blue Pete series by Luke Allan (pen name of William Lacey Amy), e.g., *Blue Pete: Half Breed* (1921). In terms of the myth of authenticity, Collin Campbell explains: "Constable Mahon [the novel's protagonist] goes on to remark that Blue Pete is dressed less like a practical and authentic cowboy and more like a caricature from a *Buffalo Bill* theatrical performance, but Blue Pete's superior wilderness skills simply add to the enigma here. He is both the least and most authentic cowboy of them all" (3). The novel's ambivalence toward hybridity is never quite resolved.

Dumont, Dominique Pétin (who also performs as John A. Macdonald).²² When the Métis performer Montana Madeleine (Krystle Pederson) rides in, “a veteran star of the Wild West Show, attired in a long traditional-style dress, beaded leggings and double holster” (23), the character named Hover (Jean Marc Dalpé, one of the writers) says dismissively in French, “[c]’est juste du théâtre” (23)—but Montana Madeleine and Madeleine Dumont object to “these white men [who] won’t listen to her story” (24). Later, when Montana Madeleine is imploring others to “wake up to . . . the systemic racism built into the founding Canadian,” she is interrupted by “the Historian” (Dalpé again) who tells her to “[c]ease and desist” (82) the “historical revisionism . . . [of] socio-politico-artistico, tree-hugging, guitar-strumming, agit-prop Lefties” (84)—suggesting that pop culture can at least attempt to speak truth to powers such as history and its often nationalist and martial biases.

According to the play, however, the risk is that embedding history within pop culture is sleeping with the enemy. Buffalo Bill, captioned on a screen at the back of the stage as “Buffalo Bill Cody, Producer” (91), tells Dumont,

I am offering you a lead role in my Wild West Show. I got braves, I got squaws, I got stage-coach robberies ‘n buffalo wrasslers. I got Annie Oakley and I even got the Great Sitting Bull on the bill, all kinds of hullabaloo for our high-falutin’ friends on the Eastern Seaboard. What I need is you: a bona fide prairie revolutionary. (91)

Buffalo Bill wants Dumont because he is “bona fide” or authentic, but his true incentive, according to the writers, is less commonly associated with authenticity. He continues: “Canada’s a small caliber outfit, Mr. Dumont, just a derringer in some wallflower’s purse. In America we got that big iron on our hip. Fame, Mr. Dumont, is what I’m talking about and you won’t find fame in Canada” (92). He says “fame” but more precisely means the notoriety of an outlaw, and when Dumont is pardoned, Buffalo Bill

22 I was unable to travel to see the play, but Robert Gagné at the National Arts Centre helpfully gave me a final or near-final script.

says, “that’s bad for business” (97). Although Dumont retorts that he is a businessman too, their styles are completely different. J. Kelly Nestruck states that “[i]n a letter Martin and Dalpé stumbled upon in their research, the playwrights discovered that Dumont even dreamed of creating his own Wild West show that would tell the story of his people more directly” (“Welcome”). That he did not create “his own Wild West show” might tell us about his style, and about how different the playwrights here are from him too. The historical Dumont may well have wondered whether it was right to stage these shows, and this question is probably one reason why the playwrights were so self-conscious and almost metacritical in this play. The concern is that the prototypical business of Hollywood makes money from “bad” guys.

The fictionalized Buffalo Bill’s marketing strategies also appear to be racist and nationalist. Elsewhere in the play, the historical figure Bishop Vital Grandin is reimagined as the ring master—the stage becoming a circus—and calls the Métis “the savage, the feral, the uncivilized” (37). They disobey him rather than act out the part he expects and demands. For the writers, “the Show” as appropriated from Buffalo Bill is a hegemonic device of colonization. And when the circus later transforms into “a hockey arena” featuring “René Lecavalier and Don Cherry, two Canadian sport casting [*sic*] legends” (44), national history is again recontextualized by popular culture, and the Métis resistance against the nascent nation-state is described as “a very special match” (45). Similarly, in act 3, part 1, Dumont and Riel are portrayed in a quiz show that serves as a sort of leadership debate between them (71–4), highlighting their different methods of achieving the same goals.

With innuendo that suggests the bad guy of big business is in real-life politics today, act 2, part 2 begins at the Battle of Duck Lake, but this deadly skirmish is recontextualized by the RCMP Musical Ride (48) and is broadcast by a fear-stoking “Foxy Fox News” (51)—one of Donald Trump’s mouthpieces. It is another satire of historical infotainment. Then “John ‘Locomotive’ Macdonald” is announced in a boxing match “like WWF [World Wrestling Federation]” (53) against “Gabriel ‘The Métis’ Dumont” (53). When Macdonald hears of Riel’s death sentence, he says, “game over” (95), as if Riel is only playing. Immediately thereafter, however—to remind us of how real the “game” was—the scene changes into

a residential school (in my own community of Battleford, near where I grew up) and shows Indigenous children's clothes turning white as they are forcibly assimilated into a colonial culture. Although the play seems at times to be articulating an especially French-Canadian perspective on an anglophone prime minister and his forces while simultaneously asserting a stronger French-Canadian alliance with Indigenous peoples, the image of the whitening clothes significantly expands the scope of the critique—while also implying that something more resilient remains underneath the whiteness.

In sum, however much *Gabriel Dumont's Wild West Show* implicates itself as a “play” in the pop-cultural transmission of the Dumont-Riel history, it is more concerned with farther-reaching media such as television and its real and symbolic sports. These media are contextualized as stereotypically and parodically Canadian extensions of an older American performance, Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. (Pushing this idea further, it is almost as if the media themselves were a spinoff of the Western—and, indeed, how many people bought televisions in the 1940s and '50s to watch Westerns? Or hockey with its “shootouts”?) Ultimately, by ironizing Canadian storytelling and Canadian nationalism, *Gabriel Dumont's Wild West Show* questions the system of white privilege that was unquestionably the dominant bias of Canadian literature until long after the country's centennial year. Although the writers of the play are mainly non-Indigenous, they call attention to various Indigenous identities, not only men's, as heroes of history and not only of a genre.²³

Cultural Appropriation and Jordan Abel's *Injun*

The risks of cultural appropriation in almost all of the texts considered thus far now lead me to be a little more self-reflective too, especially as an academic who quotes and in that way appropriates the voices of others. A more clearly problematic version of this potential problem manifested as I was writing this section when a white painter who works in Norval Morrisseau's Woodland style reignited the cyclical scandal of the cultural appropriation of Indigenous art in Canada (Szklański). Shortly before that,

23 An even greater emphasis on the women surrounding Riel and Dumont is in Maia Caron's novel, *Song of Batoche* (2017).

it was Joseph Boyden's debunking as Indigenous spokesperson (Barrera), hot on the heels of mascots and the so-called hipsters in headdresses.²⁴ To cite recent examples is not enough, of course, and Indigenous writers sometimes respond with exasperation when they encounter still more in a history of cultural appropriation; it's "*ad nauseum*," wrote Drew Hayden Taylor (11)—and he wrote that in 1995. He wrote again, in the *Globe and Mail*, as the cycle continued a few years ago ("It May be Harmless").

The recent appropriations seem all the more current and crucial in light of Jordan Abel's *Un/inhabited*, which came out in 2015, and *Injun*, in 2016. *Un/inhabited* and *Injun* are highly conceptual "found poems," meaning that they are pastiches or collages of words by other writers that he has artfully reorganized. Significantly, the words he searched for and "found" are from around a hundred novels in the genre of the Western, a genre famous for its iconographic landscapes and its convention of the cowboy and "Indian." In Abel's case, the cultural appropriation is his re-appropriation of white men's words from a genre that has a myth of the open country and, in some of its sub-genres, is more specifically about defeating Indigenous peoples and taking their land. Taylor recalls a typical question and his answer: "Question one: What do you feel about cultural appropriation? My answer: About the same as I feel about land appropriation" (11). As a result of the interdependence of land and Indigenous cultures, I worry that quoting someone's words, which are a crucial means of cultural expression, is like taking someone's land. But I also recognize Abel's books as published and public, only not in the public domain.²⁵ Critically acclaimed writers such as Abel and King would be overwhelmed with requests if they had to be asked for permission to quote their published texts.

24 For some literary-historical context about the potential for such appropriations, from a critical but non-Indigenous perspective, see Wolfgang Hochbruck's essay on Indigenous literatures as a twentieth-century industry and cultural phenomenon (272–4).

25 I do not object to Abel's use of white men's words for oppositional purposes, partly because I am not comfortable identifying myself as a white man, though I also cannot disavow the imperial histories of my French and German ancestors. I would prefer to think of myself as an ally, but Indigenous literature and studies are not my main focus, so I have not earned that "label . . . [by] continually work[ing] at [it]" (Keene), as Adrienne Keene of the *Native Appropriations* blog advises. I also have not been invited into an Indigenous community by an Indigenous person in recent years, so I am definitely an outsider—but also definitely trying not to speak up for the Western (except to establish an understanding of its history in Canada), which is a genre with too many problems to enjoy or even accept uncritically.

Germane to my reading of Abel here—and of my reading of Frank Davey’s *The Louis Riel Organ and Piano Co.* in chapter 5—is Davey’s debate with Terry Goldie over the problems and potentials of being a non-Indigenous reader and critic of Indigenous writings. Goldie had written various essays “in which [he] refused to continue as a white critic commenting on Native Canadian literature” (Goldie 119). His reasons, in brief, were to stop writing “just one more white version of Native culture,” to stop functioning as a “cultural gatekeeper,” to stop presuming to be the intended audience of Indigenous writing, and to stop implying that white people are natural to this land and that Indigenous peoples are the others or aliens (qtd. in Davey, “On Not” 8–9). Then, following Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Davey argued that white readers can earn a right to be critics if they interrogate themselves and their historical positions as a practice of their criticism. Davey believed that for white teachers to stop commenting on Indigenous writing would mean for them to stop teaching with it, and that the effect of such a silencing would simply re-marginalize Indigenous writers. Writing in 2008, Davey did not think that there were enough Indigenous teachers in universities to prevent such re-marginalizing. (This is unquestionably true of my university today.) Goldie wrote back to Davey that he “would be more open to non-indigenous criticism in a world defined by indigenous critics” (126), but, as Goldie implies, that “world” does not exist in most universities or literary circles. I agree with Davey and intend to continue teaching with Indigenous writings as long as they are published and are made available ethically to the public, but whenever possible I want to find Indigenous criticism and commentary that can “defin[e]” this world. Much of it is online. Coincidentally, the Anishinaabe comedian Ryan McMahan describes the exciting “creative space” of the Internet as “the new Wild West. The Internet and this medium [are] the new Wild West for us, except . . . there’s no—John Wayne is dead, if you will” (“New”). So, my research on the Western involves trying to find Indigenous views of the genre that put the “Indian” before the cowboy, as McMahan does with the title of his podcasting network, *Indian & Cowboy*.

Abel’s *Un/inhabited* and *Injun* are special cases, because they are largely re-appropriations of the words of white writers, and so white readers who quote these books are perhaps less complicit in cultural appropriation. As

with King's *Green Grass, Running Water*, which appropriates plots and actors such as John Wayne from classic Westerns, I feel slightly more confident in approaching these books. However, despite (or because of) his PhD, Abel does seem wary of scholars or academics. His book *Un/inhabited* has an unusual feature, an additional essay that is described on the back cover as "the first piece of scholarship on Abel's work." Its author, Kathleen Ritter, is herself described not as a scholar but as "an independent curator" (she is an artist who has worked for the Vancouver Art Gallery). Ritter calls *Un/inhabited* "a welcome provocation to reinvent these narratives [of the Western] alongside [Abel]" (xviii). Ritter was probably invited to contribute to the book and thereby ensure that the "first piece of scholarship on Abel's work" is by an ally who can avoid some of the tendencies of academics. In an interview for the *Lemon Hound* blog, Abel expresses concern about academics: "I definitely found that the 'Indian' as described by [the anthropologist Marius] Barbeau was objectified in the same way as the totem poles that Barbeau removed from their places of origin. In Barbeau's case, this objectification was not subtle but a visible extension of his academic training as an anthropologist. Barbeau was comfortable using the same anthropological process to study and catalog totem poles and to study and catalog First Nations peoples" ("In Conversation"). For white readers of Indigenous poetry, we risk appropriation when our ways of reading, ways that include marking the text and quoting the text, transform and conform the meaning of the text to a colonial idea of Indigenous poetry.

That's why Abel's *Injun* is so fascinating to me: because it re-appropriates the Western's colonial idea of the "injun" or "Indian" and, in the process, comments on the similarly colonial idea of intellectual property.²⁶ In brief, intellectual property is colonial partly because traditional

26 His practice of dealing with property, especially intellectual property, is one of my interests, and just for a moment I want to comment on this word "interest" and its relation to intellectual property. "Interest" obviously has financial connotations related to having money, which is the symbolic equivalent of properties such as land or gold. In the intellectual context, an "interest" is something that attracts your attention from all the other trivial or generic things that you could contemplate (Ngai 950). This is one of Sianne Ngai's observations: that the concept of *interesting* is also "modern, emerging in tandem with or against the development of markets, the rise of civil society, economic competition, and an increasingly specialized division of labor" (952). Because of these connotations, I try (at least in my writing) to prefer the terms "fascinating" and "curious," though "curious" does refer to commodities such as curios.

Indigenous knowledge is often of the land, and so taking the land and restricting its resources to exploit them has effects on the continued availability of that knowledge (Khan 37), and partly because it imposes the concept of individual ownership on nations that did not have the same concepts of individualism (Tan 63). Intellectual property remains a central concept for the university and the discourse of citation that gives credit for ideas and expressions. Universities in Canada are usually publicly funded because they are thought to be a public or a common good, something that is a benefit to everyone and everyone's progress: the ripple effect of education. As a public good, it should not be an opportunity for privatization, though this ideal is not what it once was. The public domain is supposed to be free of personal or private property but can be *government*-owned, which from an Indigenous perspective is likely to be ironic: it's public but colonial, thus not in the interests of Indigeneity within the public of the nation-state. Hutcheon's conception of irony as a critical "edge" in the title and contents of one of her books is all the more relevant at the truly spatial edges of the West, where "the public" and "the public domain" have not always been hospitable to marginalized or "edgy" people.

This connection between the public domain and the colonial mentality is one explanation for Abel's choice of intellectual property. He is taking it from old classic Westerns written by Americans such as Owen Wister, Zane Grey, and the ridiculously pen-named Max Brand—some of the people most responsible for popularizing stereotypes of "Indians" and for promoting the ideologies of the Western. These are the dead white men of pop-cultural literature, but both Ritter and Julie Mannell in *Vallum* magazine refer to these writers as canonical (Ritter xix; Mannell, "Featured"), as if they were Shakespeare or Dickens or Melville, say, in *Moby-Dick*. I take their point, because (as I wrote earlier in this book) the genre of the Western is a synecdoche for the literature of the Western world, a lesson I learned from King in *Green Grass, Running Water*, where John Wayne and *Moby-Dick*'s Captain Ahab are symbolically side by side. In contrast with the stereotypes of thieving "Indians" in imperialistic narratives and the Western genre, Abel's practice respects copyright laws and intellectual property. He is not stealing anyone's real or symbolic land, because even the symbolic land is in the public domain. Ritter explains that, with *Un/inhabited*, "[t]he resulting book is thus composed of entirely found text.

Nothing is ‘written’ in the conventional sense of the word” (xi). Nothing is “taken” in the conventional sense either.

As a tactic of cultural appropriation, the lesson of Abel’s found poetry seems to be that appropriation should not include restricted symbols. (It should also produce something unrecognizable as the other’s work. Abel’s data mining has the wide scope of genre, not the narrow scope of individual style or achievement.) Restricted symbols include culturally specific things such as war medals or eagle feathers (Vowel 81–7), but also creations such as privately told stories, including family secrets or certain First Nations myths. Abel’s chosen Westerns are in the public domain, unrestricted. They are different from contemporary works of art, such as Morrisseau’s Woodland style. Although a rare interlocutor might conceivably argue that the Western should be restricted because Manifest Destiny was a more or less sacred precept for the white man, Western culture writ large has developed copyright law that allows appropriation according to the principles of fair use—that is, only partial, relatively focused, and non-commercial or scholarly use. Ironically, perhaps, Abel obeys the law; it’s the restricted or sacred symbol. He seems to be saying that if you want to appropriate First Nations symbols, then you should do it on the terms of those First Nations, just as I have done it on the terms of Canadian and international law.

By limiting his selection to the public domain, he avoids the intellectual property of others and implies an alternative to the colonial assumption that the West was free land, or open country, uninhabited by the First Nations and Native Americans. Echoing Taylor’s link between culture and land, Ritter explains that Abel “appropriates and transforms the genre [of the Western] to produce something unique: a meditation on the relationship between text and land. The question *Un/inhabited* poses is a political one: Can a reader inhabit a text the way one inhabits land? This question is at the core of Abel’s process of appropriation, extraction and reterritorialization” (xi). Although I don’t think “a meditation on the relationship between text and land is unique,” nor is erasure poetry unique, I agree that “Abel’s use of appropriation as a methodology is classic: he takes a source text and, without changing any of the words, subjects it to a number of processes that ultimately recontextualize and politicize it in a way that the original authors could never have imagined” (xvi). In that

sense, it's unique, and I agree with the explanation and the emphasis on the question of how reading—reading the Western especially—is a claim on land. Ritter again explains that “it is a reclaiming and reversal of the genre, as a comment on the fraught relationship between this narrative history, identity and indigenous rights to the land” (xvii).

Abel also, however, seems to foreground his “own” voice in a lyric sequence about “play[ing] injun in gods country” (3) that ultimately breaks down, “progressively,” as extra spaces and gaps appear in the text, symbolizing how Western ideas of ownership and progress have been detrimental to Indigenous voices. Abel writes found poems but also erasure poetry. In both *Un/inhabited* and *Injun*, the act of reading a progressively more blanked out or erased text simulates the incapacitation or destruction of the reader's language. It simulates illiteracy. It parallels the destruction of Indigenous languages by processes of colonization such as residential schooling; Abel identifies himself in an interview with rob mclennan as “an intergenerational survivor of the Canadian residential school system” (“Seven”). When Abel copies a line from a Western that contains one of his keywords, such as “injun,” he blanks out the keyword so that the reader has to fill it in to make sense of the line. Calling attention to erasure is one of the strategies of *Un/inhabited*. Ritter explains that “absences are as important as text” (xv) in *Un/inhabited*, as they are in *Injun*. As the reader says the word, mentally or aloud, the reader is also implicated in the damaging erasure and the insulting re-inscription of the word.

Abel's *Un/inhabited* and *Injun* offer non-Indigenous readers a powerful experience of simulated colonialism, including the overwhelming generic repetition of racist, disempowering representations of people and places. This experience can remind non-Indigenous readers that we are the outsiders, as in books such as James Welch's 1986 novel *Fools Crow* (Chester 93). It also reminds them that the West denies Indigenous conceptions of “Indian Territory” and its related sovereignty, contrary to the alternative “West” in books such as John Milton Oskison's *Black Jack Davy* (Kirby Brown 79–80). Although some Indigenous scholars of Westerns describe ambivalent Indigenous responses to the genre, as in King's *Green Grass, Running Water*, Abel's books are almost entirely negative in their assessment, because the “found” text disperses and excludes Indigenous voices. There's a somewhat positive twist: the “found poem” conceit. It enables

a productive irony (however depressing it might also be) of the “Indian” finding his voice or at least *a* voice in all the words of “cowboys.”

The Searchers and Maliglutit

Having considered some significant examples of rethinking the Western through Indigeneity, with significant representation from Indigenous writers such as Abel, King, Gottfriedson, and the collaborators on *Gabriel Dumont’s Wild West Show*, I want to approach the following chapter and its realignment of the West toward the North by transitionally considering Zacharias Kunuk and Natar Ungalaaq’s 2016 film *Maliglutit*, the second-ever feature film in Inuktitut (the first being their *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner*, from 2001). The film’s Inuktitut title, which is translated as “followers” in the subtitles, refers to John Ford’s 1956 film *The Searchers*. Both films involve a kidnapping and a quest to retrieve the kidnapped person or people, but they differ greatly in location and racial commentary. *Maliglutit* is set in the Far North and comprised entirely of Inuit characters; *The Searchers* is set mainly in the American Southwest and features white, mixed, and Indigenous characters. *The Searchers* gave John Wayne one of his most unforgettable roles, as a former soldier driven both to racist desecration of a Comanche body and to unspeakable rage at the thought of miscegenation between his niece and a Comanche chief. Its ending is iconic, an almost still-life picture of a seemingly injured Wayne turning away, blocked off by the backlit doorframe of a home where he can never belong. This symbolism of the hero who cannot settle and must move on, even as he enables others to settle, is a Western convention that depends on a dichotomy of wide open space and settlement. “I grew up on the land,” Kunuk said in 2017 of the area around Igloodik; “when I was a child I thought we were the only people on Earth” (qtd. in “Zacharias Kunuk Reimagines”). Kunuk and Ungalaaq move *The Searchers* into the North, where wide open spaces remain partly protected by the harshness of the landscape itself. Cian Cruise explains that, “[d]espite being set in the north, *Maliglutit* is a western through and through. It’s got a harsh landscape where folk eke out an existence, a homestead vibe with each isolated igloo days apart on the tundra and a social space where individuals must enforce their own law” (“*Maliglutit*”). (It also needs a figure of the cowboy—more on this below.) Kunuk and Ungalaaq’s Indigenous intervention

into the Western is to use the North as a stand-in for the West, an intervention that other writers and directors have already suggested but without such a direct relationship to a single classic American Western such as *The Searchers*. In creating the direct relationship, they can go beyond geography and symbolism into differences of narrative, implying that geographic and symbolic analogues do not determine the narrative.

Kunuk did not start out with questions but was subjected to the sway of the Western. At some residential schools, where Indigenous children were forcibly re-educated in English, children were shown Westerns, and, as one survivor of these schools has said, they often “re-enacted some of the more dramatic scenes of the movie and of course we played cowboys and Indians. Everyone wanted to be a cowboy; nobody wanted to be an Indian” (Miller 281). Echoing many other Indigenous people who have been fans of Wayne, Kunuk remembers being sent to school in Igloolik, where there was “a little community hall where they would show 16 millimetre movies. A lot of it was cowboys and Indians and John Wayne. . . . John Wayne was our hero” (qtd. in “Zacharias Kunuk Reimagines”). Later, Kunuk realized that the influence of the Western had been insidious, along with less subtle influences from Wayne’s culture: “Four thousand years of oral tradition silenced by fifty years of priests, schools, and cable TV” (qtd. in Cruise). For this reason, Kunuk’s two major films pay anthropological attention to the recovery of historical and cultural details. Kate Taylor describes it as “an almost documentary examination of pre-modern life in the Arctic” (“Maliglutit”). It ranges from types of clothing, food preparation, and travel, to invocations of oral tradition and religion, including, I presume, the spirit of the loon that Kuanana (Benjamin Kanuk) receives as a helper from his dying father, an elder. The loon’s call sets Kuanana on the trail toward his kidnapped family, and it is simultaneously the narrative’s call to its mythic past and to its parallel in the here and now.

When *Maliglutit* was being made, the Canadian government and various Indigenous organizations were beginning the consultations that eventually led to the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG), but reviews of the films have not yet emphasized how this context invites us to interpret the narrative. Most provocatively, the coincidence or the intention of the timing speaks back to the Vanishing “Indian” motif of Westerns, implying that in

Canada today a trope of genocide persists: “Vanishing” becomes “Missing and Murdered.” With recent revelations of hundreds of unmarked graves near former residential schools in Western Canada (Eneas), the Vanishing “Indian” motif becomes even more relevant and real. (Some might argue that the trope cannot be genocidal if the violence is somehow limited by its gendered and unsystematic methods—however *systemic* it is—but the implication is compelling, especially under the broader rubric of cultural genocide.) Whereas *The Searchers* involves the kidnapping of a white girl by Comanche people, *Maliglutit* involves the kidnapping of an Inuit woman and her daughter by a banished Inuit gang. “Gone is the racial conflict at the core of Ford’s film” (Cruise); instead, in *Maliglutit* the antagonism is all within a community. This variation in plots speaks to the MMIWG inquiry, which tends to focus on systemic problems introduced to Indigenous communities by colonists and the enforcers among them. Among its priorities, the MMIWG inquiry often airs the concern that the police are not equally diligent and determined when they are searching for Indigenous women compared to white women. *Maliglutit* offers a very Western solution: in the absence of law (at least, the absence of colonial police), seek justice on your own. Thus, Kuanana and his eldest son become “searchers” (or “followers”) when Kuanana’s wife and daughter are kidnapped in an assault on his family that leaves his youngest son and his two elders dead. With closer family ties than the uncle and niece in the precursor by Ford, *Maliglutit* emphasizes an intergenerational diversity that is not unlike the addition of “G” to the “W” in “MMIWG.” Similarly for the males, Kuanana and his son are at risk because they are outnumbered by the gang, and they are aided (despite the women’s efforts to escape) only by the gift of help from the loon. The spirit of the loon implies—as a commentary on the MMIWG inquiry—that Indigenous self-reliance and familial co-operation are not all that is required: so is a belief in the stories that draw power from myth and land.

The power of the loon, however, is spiritual or mental (i.e., as direction, as determination) compared to the physical power that Kuanana brings with him: his gun. Set around 1913, *Maliglutit* includes various signs of contact with explorers, and the gun is the most prominent. In his essay on the film, Cruise asserts that in *Maliglutit* “retribution is . . . a travesty. It is a failure” (“*Maliglutit*”). Much like the gun, this is a loaded statement.

On one hand, it is a success, not “a failure,” when Kuanana and his family kill the kidnappers. On the other, it is indeed a failure if a colonial and Western symbol, the gun, must be used in the achievement of justice, and if justice must be death. Interpreted in this latter way, *Maliglutit* is deeply ironic: a “pro-Indian” Western that concludes with the social Darwinism of surviving by “virtue” of having the better weapon, not (necessarily) a better idea of justice or community.

The representation of the gun in *Maliglutit*, however, is nothing like the venerating gaze upon the phallic six-shooter that we see in so many Westerns. Although Kuanana’s gun is the only one in the story and gains importance through this fact, it is a simple rifle with a worn stock, and until now he had used it primarily for hunting caribou. Contrary to the fantastically infinite supply of bullets in most action movies, in *Maliglutit* there are only three bullets. When Kuanana goes hunting on the advice of the elder who spoke with one of the spirits, Apisaaq, for guidance, his first shot is heard by Kupak from a distance, alerting him to the likelihood that the igloo would be relatively undefended—no armed man. The gun here is a liability, but Kuanana does get a caribou. The second shot, like the first, is not shown onscreen. Kuanana is chasing the gang and presumably fires at the gang member who was ordered to slow down for reconnaissance (killing him, I think). The distant sound sets off the women’s escape attempt. In both cases, the gunshot is a signal that prompts action. Near the end, through terrain near Igloolik that is vaguely like Monument Valley—flat barrens with (short) flat-topped rocky outcroppings—Kuanana sneaks up and clobbers one of the three remaining bad guys with his gun stock. With his third and final shot, he kills the man who was straddling his beaten-down son and about to knife him. He then finds Kupak (Joey Sarpinak), the bear-spirited leader of the banished men. Kupak guesses correctly that Kuanana is out of bullets, and Kuanana’s attempted intimidation with the gun therefore doesn’t achieve the desired effect. Larger, stronger, and a murderer, Kupak beats Kuanana with his cudgel. Then Kuanana’s wife Ailla comes out of nowhere and spears Kupak when he is on Kuana, about to bludgeon him to death. In the context of MMIWG, the woman’s action encourages women to fight back. Ailla becomes as much the cowboy as her husband is. In the context of the genre, her mastery of

her own phallic symbol when her husband's is failing is a partial revision of the Western's strong association between men and guns.

It is a symbolic mastery, and it helps to return the shooting, for its viewers, to the realm of the unseen that Kuanana had to disturb to save his son. Keeping the first two shots out of sight minimizes the violence; it is not gratuitous, unlike in most Westerns. The third shot centres our attention on the gun as a tool to shift the dynamics of power and to defeat our enemies, but Ailla's effectiveness with a more traditional weapon implies that the filmmakers would prefer that guns remain distant—close enough to hear, but too far to be a danger to the people. In this respect, and probably only this respect, the gun is like Kalluliik, the spirit of the loon: invisible in its actions and therefore mythically powerful. For *Maliglutit*, there is a balance between the gun and Kalluliik. Both are necessary to find and defeat the enemy, but Kalluliik is not violent. Like Apisaaq, Kalluliik is a source of knowledge, not a destroyer.

Pushing gun violence off-screen is an example that I would use to support Jaymes Durante's conclusion that, as a potential "anti-colonialist rebuke," the film is "surprisingly composed and non-confrontational" ("*Maliglutit*"). But this semblance is not only a result of the film's long shots, which sometimes hardly stray from establishing shots; it is also a result of the remoteness of colonial activity. Durante observes: "That it's set in 1913—nine years before *Nanook [of the North]* and 45 after Ford's Civil War-set *The Searchers*—isn't at all evident, barring the ongoing presence of a set of binoculars [actually, a telescope] and the late appearance of a rifle. The film has a peculiar, culturally specific relationship with time, influenced no doubt by the far north's extreme location and its eternal days and nights" ("*Maliglutit*").

While Durante points the film up, if up is north, and if the North is a new West (as I argue in the next chapter), Travis Hopson orients it differently: "If you thought *The Revenant* looked cold, *Searchers [Maliglutit]* is closer to an icy Hell" ("Filmfest"). Certainly the notion of a bi-directional, vertical Christian frame for the story has some merit, because the directors are so obviously alluding to the Ford and Wayne collaboration—but Hopson also echoes a colonial discourse in his conclusion: "*Searchers* may prove too culturally specific for some audiences, but for those looking to experience a rarely-explored civilization through the frame of a Western

classic, this is a film to seek out” (“Filmfest“). Searching, for viewers, becomes a problematic exploration, but at least it’s of the art of cinema.

The third chapter will consider exploration and settlement in greater detail, mainly in relation to the “Muscular Christian” that Candida Rifkind and Daniel Coleman have investigated in early Canadian Westerns and their Mounties, but in this chapter we have considered the related figures of John Wayne and Gabriel Dumont. For Soleymanlou and the writers of *Gabriel Dumont’s Wild West Show*, Dumont is the historical figure who can resist the cultural persuasion of a star of the Western such as Wayne. Dumont’s recontextualization alongside the Western appears to be mainly a non-Indigenous act of imagination, and it may evince a feeling of identification that problematically extends from a more justifiable recognition of similarities between the Métis resisting Canada, on the one hand, and Canada resisting the United States and its popular culture, on the other. But Kunuk, Gottfriedson, Abel, and even King are less preoccupied with fighting fire with fire and look instead to more novel methods of resisting. For Kunuk and collaborators on *Maliglutit*, the entire narrative of colonial versus Indigenous violence is rewritten as an intracultural drama in which race is not an issue except in the subtext of its response to Ford’s *The Searchers*. For King in *Green Grass, Running Water*, despite his sympathy for fans of John Wayne, the alternative is less a Canadian star or hero than the mythic figures of Coyote and the spirits of what he calls the Old Indians. For Abel in *Injun*, the alternative is the non-Indigenous reader whose experience of simulated assimilation and dispossession leads to a new awareness, but at the same time his method of distant reading effectively depersonalizes the reader’s experience (another simulation, in fact) and inhibits many of the identifications with the characters of the Western. For Gottfriedson in *Whiskey Bullets*, characters of the Western such as the cowboy and the “Indian” are similarly appealing but also deeply problematic as stereotypes and role models, and so the alternative is Horsechild (a figure I will try to explain in chapter 5): a return to the land and to other animals whose spirits, like Kalluliik in *Maliglutit*, animate a relationship with the world that is more balanced and more just. These Indigenous texts (and one non-Indigenous) all contend with the Western and attempt to offer guidance in thinking through the personal and systemic problems exacerbated by the genre.