Refusing to Listen and Listening to Refusal: Dialogue, Healing, and Rupture in *Green Grass, Running Water*[*]

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Abstract
In *Red Skin, White Masks Glen* Sean Coulthard speaks to the asymmetries that plague state-driven attempts at enforcing recognition, reciprocity, and reconciliation with First Peoples communities in post-TRC Canada. Although the exigency of achieving a mutually-beneficial, reciprocal form of communication between settler-state and First Peoples has grown especially visible in our present moment, the mechanics of listening and speaking both within and between communities have in fact long been a pivotal concern in First Peoples' fiction.
This project investigates the functions of dialogue in Greek-Cherokee novelist Thomas King's Green Grass, Running Water with attention to King's unique style of writing non-dialogues between characters, as well as the structural role that dialogue plays in his writing more broadly, my analysis shows how the act of refusing to listen becomes a means for transforming and generating new conversations across different (typically intercommunal) power dynamics.

We need to talk about dialogue.

When someone tells you, "We need to talk about x," what they are saying is not exactly "I want to talk *with you* about something," but "I want you to listen *to me* while I talk about something." What they are saying at the very least is "I want to take up space in your thoughts and attentions." In and of itself, to ask for someone's attention as a listener is no harmful request. Where it gets dangerous is when we start to conflate the act of demanding attention with what we like to call dialogue. For many folks —some more so than others— "dialogue" is an alibi, a means of taking up space where they've been neither welcomed nor invited. "Dialogue," in other words, is little more than an occasion, if not an excuse, to plant one's flag wherever and whenever one likes and to demand to be heard. The attractiveness of this kind of "dialogue" is obvious: it is (em)power(ment), albeit one which is, again, more readily accessible to some than to others.

Positionality, privilege, and power are, of course, the key variables here. The questions of who gets to say what, in what ways, in what contexts, and with what effects are entirely dependent upon the shifting political ground on which we stand as listeners and speakers. It means one thing for Lee Maracle, a Sto:lo woman and an early champion of First Peoples' writing, to storm the stage at the 1988 Vancouver Writers Festival and to demand that her voice be heard. It means another thing entirely for Alan Twigg, a nationally-decorated stalwart of CanLit and a white man, to cry out during a presentation by Rebecca Benson, a Six Nations Tuscarora woman, at the 2018 Vancouver Writers Festival about how he felt that her territorial acknowledgement amounted to her telling him what to think. In these two explosive interventions, the inciting action is ostensibly the same: a person *refuses to listen* to what is being spoken and demands instead *to be listened to*. Superficially, the motivations behind each action are also the same: by refusing to listen and insisting upon being heard the actor expresses a desire for empowerment in response to a situation of (perceived) disempowerment. The key difference, of course, is in whether and to what extent that situation of disempowerment depends upon pre-existing structures —and, more importantly, in what is at stake in upsetting or reaffirming those structures. For Maracle, the demand to be listened to as a racialized, marginalized, and systemically vulnerable body (that is, as an Indigenous woman in the settler-state known as Canada) is also a demand to be free from the very real violence, neglect, and disrespect that are structurally attached to her positionality. For Twigg, the demand to be listened to as a privileged and relatively secure body is a demand that the current structure —the same structure that directs its violence, neglect, and disrespect at subordinate figures like Indigenous women— should remain in place.

If there is one thing I hope to have made clear in this preamble, it is that listening and speaking are two fundamentally explosive processes (especially where settler peoples and First Peoples are concerned) that we could do better to stop and unpack. In the field of First Peoples literature and political scholarship, the impasse that results from the difficulties of listening and speaking across differences has long been of chief concern, but it has also achieved increased visibility and vitality in the present context of Canada's controversial Truth and Reconciliation Commission and its aftermath. Numerous critics of the TRC process have pointed out, from varying angles and with considerable nuance, how state-driven reconciliation is beset by the inherent vice of its one-sidedness. Jennifer Henderson, from one angle, expresses deep skepticism towards the kind of "redress claims articulated to the political rationality that increasingly renders *unsayable* those other kinds of political claims" and which "circumscribe the social and political imaginary, to naturalize certain forms of agency" (64). Eva Mackey, looking specifically at the mechanisms of state apology, similarly notes "that settler-state treaty and apologies construct Aboriginal–non-Aboriginal relationships in a manner that rejects relationships of mutuality and respect because they mirror the constitution's version of reconciliation in which Crown sovereignty is supreme" (55). The recurring problem is that the settler-state continues to retain for itself the power to speak and to thus shape the conversation in a way that forecloses the possibility of listening and responding to First Peoples as interlocutors.

Indeed, in response to Mackey's pressing question, "How might we develop a kind of listening that encourages a genuine 'dialogic encounter' where speakers and listeners are continually implicated in the exchange?" (59), I propose that, in the realm of storytelling, we may find examples of First Peoples writers who have already helped us to address this issue and to imagine alternative outcomes. This project is therefore premised on the belief that First Peoples storytelling (and, as I acknowledge their continuity as well as their difference, its present-day iteration among the literary print market) has something to teach us, as an audience of readers. My project begins with the simple observation that the characters in Greek-Cherokee author Thomas King's 1993 novel *Green Grass, Running Water* tend to talk past one another —less like an exchange of dialogue than an interlacing of unrelated monologues. My interest grew upon realizing that, for one, critics had not adequately commented upon what I saw as this key feature of King's writing and, for another, that the characters in Tetlit Gwich'in author Robert Arthur Alexie's novel *Porcupines and China Dolls* experience similar difficulties when it comes to listening and speaking to one another. What each of these novels do is to draw our attention to

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a socially-pervasive roadblock to listening and to give us the tools to imagine alternate trajectories. In *Green Grass, Running Water*, which will be the focus of this paper, the question is similar to Mackey's: how can we achieve a more reciprocal basis for listening? While King's novel has attracted considerable scholarly attention, resulting in an extensive range of essays dealing with oral tradition,[1] intertextuality,[2] gender fluidity,[3] iconoclasm,[4] mapping,[5] and even postmodernity,[6] critics have largely neglected to confront a key feature of King's formal arsenal: his dialogue. In this novel particularly, King's unique strategy of having characters engage (or, to be more accurate, *pretend to* engage) in a style of non-conversation —in which the voices merely talk past each other without actually addressing or engaging one another— sets up a complicated critique of the ways in which dialogue is, in a very fundamental way, a direct function of relations of power and positionality. Although the immediate effect of these non-conversations is comedic, their resulting defamiliarization of the prescripted dialogues upon which individuals and institutions come to depend also sets the stage for King to imagine an alternative, in which non-listening, or *the act of refusing to listen*, flips from a tool of subordination to an occasion for resistance and recalibration.

While King is more concerned with listening and speaking at a nuts-and-bolts interpersonal level, the stakes of his critique depend upon our understanding that those two fundamental mechanisms of exchange are consistent across all levels of the socio-political ladder. Listening and speaking, in other words, are tools that come into play at both the macro-political level of nation-states and the micro-personal level of intimate conversation. At the macro level of the settler-colonial nation-state, the exchange is not of words or discourses necessarily (although it may assume those forms at some point), but of gestures of power. In Henderson and Mackey's work, we have already encountered examples of such gestures in the recent history of Canada and First Peoples, where the settler-state has attempted to broker a trade of various tokens by the names of apology, recognition, and reconciliation. Of course, the operative word here is *attempted*. In its present iteration, the project of reconciliation is at best a lopsided endeavour that remains contingent upon an incomplete and unilateral exchange.

In his book *Red Skin, White Masks*, Dene scholar Glen Sean Coulthard offers an extended critique of these categories of reconciliation and recognition in the various troublesome forms they may take. Evoking Frantz Fanon, he argues that the central problem of the state-driven model of reconciliation is that "recognition is not posited as a source of freedom and dignity for the colonized, *but rather as the field of power through which colonial relations are produced and maintained*" (17 emphasis in original). To elaborate, Coulthard explains that "when delegated exchanges of recognition occur in the real-world contexts of domination, the terms of accommodation usually end up determined by and in the interests of the hegemonic partner in the relationship" (17). The lingering problem is that the terms of recognition and reconciliation are all-to-often dictated by those already in-power in ways that, regardless of stated intentions, merely replicate rather than remediate the asymmetrical power dynamics which separate the colonizer from the colonized in the first place.

As far as dialogue is concerned, the problem as Coulthard and Fanon would describe it is one of control-oriented non-listening: the colonizer will only listen to —or *recognize*— the colonized insofar as they continue to dictate the overall form and content of what gets said. Jennifer Henderson's notion of the *sayable* and the *unsayable* is useful for fleshing out the stakes of this asymmetry. The colonizing state not only reserves the right to determine what is sayable (by, for instance, framing the exchange at the outset in terms of gestures like "recognition" and "reconciliation"), but it also assumes implicit control of what is unsayable by not listening to, not recognizing, or otherwise excluding anything that might disrupt or alter the field of power it seeks to maintain. In this sense, the term "exchange" is inappropriate; rather than effecting a reciprocal engagement in which each side may speak and respond as needed, the colonizer extends itself into and over the colonized on a unilateral basis which establishes the convenient illusion of an exchange while merely replicating the conditions of its dominance. The challenge, to put it bluntly, is to move away from the unilateral and to recapture the reciprocal.

1 See Martin Ulm and Martin Kuester, who consider the points of overlap between King's version of Indigenous orality and Mikael Bakhtin's theory of intertextuality; and Sharon M. Bailey, who argues that King uses the oral tradition to override the dominant authority of the written text.

2 See Greg Bechtel, who considers how the novel upsets the common binaries of Native/non-Native and Real/Fantasy; Gabriele Helms, who applies Bakhtin's concepts of double-voicing and the carnivalesque to the novel; and Blanca Schorcht, who also invokes Bakhtinian intertextuality to differentiate the novel from the Western canon.

3 See Susan Rintoul, whose essay on the novel's gender-bending characterizations raises important questions as to how the processes of reading and misreading are central to King's storytelling.

4 See Herb Wyile's oft-cited essay on the novel's irreverent spin on Canadian multiculturalism.

5 See Marlene Goldman, whose two essays on the novel consider how King foregrounds an Indigenous cosmology to resist the dominant apocalyptic narrative of cultural and territorial erasure; as well as Arnold E. Davidson, Priscilla L. Walton, and Jennifer Andrews' monograph on King, which synthesizes many of the aforementioned subjects under the metaphorical banner of border-crossing.

6 See Marta Dvořák, who considers King's writing in terms of metafiction and metatextuality.

If at first glance the analogy between exchanges of dialogue and of political recognition seems like an odd fit,[7] *Green Grass, Running Water*'s status not just as a literary text but as a boldly self-aware text with an acute interest in the mechanisms of storytelling and (for lack of a better term) story-hearing can help get us there. The novel dramatizes this analogy in one of its quirkier and less-discussed narrative strands, in which a black hospital orderly named Babo, her overseeing doctor Joe Hovaugh, and American police Sergeant Cereno try (but mostly fail) to work together to locate four Old Indians who have escaped from a mental hospital. The dialogues involving the Babo-Hovaugh-Cereno triad are particularly helpful as a starting-point insofar as they caricature the asymmetries of racialized, institutional, and state power in a direct, if somewhat obvious, manner. In one instance early in the novel, Sergeant Cereno tries to interrogate Babo regarding the disappearance, only for the dialogue to quickly fly off-track:

> [Babo:] "Some people think Babo is a man's name."
>
> [Cereno:] "Working here must get dull sometimes."
>
> "But it's not. It's tradition."
>
> "I mean, getting up every morning, eating breakfast, driving across town, punching in."
>
> "Firstborn gets named Babo."
>
> "But you must have ways to liven up the day."
>
> "Are you recording this?"
>
> "Yes, I am Ms. Jones."
>
> "You watch a lot of television?"
>
> "Why don't we let me ask the questions." (24)

Here, the power structure of the conversation is not unlike that of a state-driven bid for nominal reconciliation: we have a white settler-state official entering into a crisis situation involving political and racial minorities, demanding answers from those minority figures in an effort to *reconcile* them with the official narrative, and failing to listen to any information that does not conform to said narrative. Cereno asserts this authority at the end of the exchange when he phrases the question, "Why don't we let me ask the questions." With telling verbal irony, this question is not so much an opening for discussion, but an imperative declaration: ending as it does with a period, rather than a question mark, he is *telling* her how it is, not asking.[8] Babo, however, refuses to concede to Cereno's authority by bouncing his one-sided agenda back at him. While Cereno goes through the motions of appealing to the mundane aspects of Babo's job, she tries to steer the conversation in a different direction altogether, describing her family's tradition of naming the firstborn children Babo and then asking Cereno if he watches "a lot of television." In a sense, both sides stubbornly refuse to listen to one another, so that the dialogue meanders and digresses. Still, although the express purpose of the interrogation is compromised, a different and perhaps more revelatory conversation manages to emerge. From Babo's side of the dialogue, we actually learn some unique details about her family history, not to mention about her impressive confidence in the face of cold authority. As a result, what would otherwise be a marginal side character with only a discrete minor function in the story becomes, by virtue of her own conversive agency, a central presence, in direct contravention of the police investigator's authority to dictate the form of the conversation.

What transpires between Cereno and Babo are competing acts of political refusal. Mohawk anthropologist Audra Simpson defines refusal as "a political and ethical stance that stands in stark contrast to the desire to have one's distinctiveness as a culture, as a people, recognized. Refusal comes with the requirement of having one's *political* sovereignty acknowledged and upheld, and raises the question of legitimacy for those who are usually in the position of recognizing" (11 emphasis in original). Crucially, for both King and Simpson, the vitality of refusal as a counter-gesture rests upon two things: the position from which that refusal emerges and the "question of legitimacy" which said refusal poses. As with Lee Maracle and Alan Twigg's respective interventions at the 1988 and 2018 Vancouver Writers Festivals, direction and privilege are the key determiners in this

7 To some degree, it seems so for Coulthard; later in *Red Skin, White Masks*, he comes across as more openly critical of discursive or negotiative modes of reconciliation. In reference to former national chief Ovide Mercredi's infamous statement before the Assembly of First Nations that it is "only through talk, not through blockades, that real progress will be made," Coulthard dismisses outright the assumption that "the most productive means to forge lasting change in the lives of indigenous people and communities is through the formal channels of negotiation" (167). I don't mean to debate Coulthard's assertion that constructive talk must coexist with disruptive action; I contend, however, that it would be wrong to take this as an outright dismissal of the power of talk. For one, his is not a question of talk itself, but of how that talk unfolds. The subtle distinction in Coulthard's argument is between a way of talking which affirms the state superstructure and a way of talking which disrupts that structure. Furthermore, for my purposes as well as Coulthard's, it is important to consider that actions, gestures, speaking, and listening are modes of exchange that can and will bleed into one another. Without belabouring the point, I would argue that there is an empowering continuity, for example, between the intimate acts of disruptive non-listening that we find in *Green Grass, Running Water* and the larger-scale acts of performative resistance that Coulthard describes, such as the erecting of blockades.

8 King returns to the police interrogation as a form of one-sided dialogue in his detective novels, *DreadfulWater Shows Up* and *The Red Power Murders* (see: pages 180-181 and 216 in the former and pages 157 and 261 in the latter). There, however, it is Thumps DreadfulWater, a Cherokee ex-cop, who takes on the role of interrogator, albeit self-consciously and somewhat reluctantly.

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"question of legitimacy." If, to recall Coulthard's version of the argument, state recognition extends its power from the top-down, King and Simpson imagine the power to refuse specifically as a counterstrike that extends from the bottom-up. It is along these lines that Babo refuses to listen to those white, male, institutional authority figures who speak down to her as a black woman of lower institutional footing. In this scenario, Babo's persistent refusals to listen to authority become a means of short-circuiting the dialogue-as-script and of yielding insight as to the asymmetries of power upon which those institutionally-scripted exchanges depend.

With that being said, for neither King nor Simpson are these refusals necessarily viable as a definitive solution to the problems they address. With Babo (and later with Eli Stands Alone), the gesture of refusing to listen short-circuits the dialogue at-hand, but, in an odd twist, also creates a kind of negative reciprocity in which non-listening meets with further non-listening. Going by the logic that, as the saying goes, two wrongs don't make a right, this negative reciprocity would seem unproductive at best and counterproductive at worst —indeed, Babo and Eli don't exactly gain anything in an immediate sense by refusing to listen to authority. What we must understand is that non-listening, the refusal to listen, does not guarantee a better listening practice as an outcome, but is instead one step in an ongoing process of reimagining how we listen to one another. If refusal interrupts a given script, that interruption should function not as yet another roadblock, but rather as an occasion for the affirmation of *something else*. This give-and-take process is precisely what Simpson proposes when she writes that political refusers:

> must be willing to pay a price when those connections do not achieve the desired outcome. This price is demobilization, not being able to compete. However, this may not be a price at all if the gains exceed it. Here the gain is the assertion of the principle, the sign of the other political authority, vibrant and insistent, and the suggestion of possibilities beyond the horizon of what we may think is a 'good' or a 'gift'." (183)

It is this emphasis on the "gains" of a refusal that motivates Leanne Simpson to characterize Audra Simpson's theory as one of "generative refusal" (*As We Have Always Done* 178). Generative refusal, she adds, does not shut down an ongoing process, but instead creates an occasion for "organizing and mobilizing within a radical resurgent politic" (178). In terms of the challenges of achieving reciprocal dialogue, the price of short-circuiting a given conversation in the short run is offset by, first, the insight gained in the act of refusing and, second, the ensuing affirmation of an alternative model of listening and speaking in the longer run.

For King, what gets affirmed is first and foremost a renewed respect for the process, rather than the prescribed outcome, of engagement. In the Babo-Hovaugh-Cereno scenes, the emphasis on process is primarily diagnostic. When Babo and Dr. Hovaugh later attempt to cross the border into Canada in pursuit of the four missing Old Indians, their encounter with the Canadian border patrol makes an outright mockery of the rigid customs process.[9] As tense and regimented a process as passing through customs tends to be, Babo nonetheless manages to throw the conversation off the rails:

> "Did you notice," Babo said to the Canadian border guard, "that your flagpole is crooked?"
>
> "Destination?" said the border guard.
>
> "North," said Dr. Hovaugh.
>
> "The American one is crooked, too. See how it leans a bit to the right?"
>
> "Purpose of your visit?" said the guard.
>
> "Business," said Dr. Hovaugh.
>
> "We're looking for Indians," said Babo.
>
> "Any firearms or tobacco?"
>
> "No," said Dr. Hovaugh.
>
> "Four Indians," said Babo. "Really old ones." (236)

What is all the more interesting about this non-conversation is how the three agencies simultaneously intersect and stratify. Dr. Hovaugh, an American medical doctor, and the Canadian border guard each represent state authorities, albeit conflicting ones. Nonetheless, Dr. Hovaugh acquiesces to the border guard's line of questioning, answering for the most part in monosyllables. He *recognizes* the border guard's authority to ask the questions, submits himself to those questions, and thereby reaffirms that authoritative structure. It is as if, by playing the role of the co-operative respondent and participating in that economy of non-conversive dialogue, he is edifying not only the Canadian guard's authority but, counterintuitively, his own as well. Babo, on the other hand, representing both the quotidian subject of state authority and the racialized minority position, subverts the prescribed dialogue altogether. For one, she asks the first question, beating the border guard to the punch. Better still, the question she asks is a symbolically loaded one —"Did

9 For another extended take on this topic, see King's contemporaneous short story "Borders" from his 1993 collection *One Good Story, That One*.

you notice that your flagpole is crooked?"— singling out the flag as a signifier of state authority and calling out the fact that it is "crooked," which might refer to the fragility of that authority, the injustice of its structures, or even the asymmetries of power that underwrite it. In contrast to Dr. Hovaugh's short, conciliatory answers to the border guard's questions, Babo attempts to steer the dialogue in other, more specific directions. She supplements Hovaugh's reply that they are in Canada on "Business" by elaborating that they are "looking for Indians." Then, completely disregarding the guard's question about firearms, she further specifies that they are looking for "Four Indians. Really old ones." Not only does she resist the border guard's authority to dictate the terms of the conversation, but she forcibly interjects details and specifics about the situation that the prescriptive mode of dialogue would not typically permit. Whereas the guard enters into the dialogue looking for one predetermined set of answers, Babo upsets the balance of authority by throwing her own set of questions and answers into the mix. Thus, although both the guard and Dr. Hovaugh continue to ignore her interjections for the time being, the result is a kind of breaking point. From this line of flight,[10] King introduces the potential for a dialogue which is more expansive, equal-footed, and attentive to specificity, in which state, subject, center, and margin are allowed to engage each other freely and to enter into a kind of truth process that accounts for all voices and agencies, rather than just those who hold nominal authority.

Of course, to conclude the matter here would be premature, for the bulk of the novel in fact devotes itself not just to exposing the pervasiveness of non-listening as a socio-political practice, but also to teasing out the seemingly endless dimensions and iterations of the non-listening that stands in the way of intervening agencies like Babo's. To remain with Hovaugh and Cereno for a moment longer, one such dimension involves the sergeant's insidious knack for shaping not just the dialogue in-progress, but dialogues which have already passed. Humourously enough, Cereno applies this form of retroactive manipulation during an exchange that spans only two pages of text:

> "So, what exactly were they being treated for?"
> "Depression," said Dr. Hovaugh.
> "Are they sociopaths?"
> "Good heavens, no."
> "But you said they might be dangerous."
> "Did I?"
> Cereno leafed back through the notebook. "Question: Are they dangerous? Answer: The Indians?"
> Dr. Hovaugh pushed down on the desk. "I see." (76)

With the help of his ongoing records, Cereno controls the exchange to such an extent that the question and answer he cites here comes from page 75 —a mere one page prior. The sinister tenor of the joke is that Cereno, simply by virtue of keeping notes on the dialogue as it unfolds, manages to keep one step above Hovaugh's authority even when the reality of short-term memory should make Cereno's ever-so-slight advantage seem trivial. What makes the situation even more absurd is the fact that Hovaugh so readily acquiesces to Cereno's authority. For one, Hovaugh allows himself to be cast decisively in the role of responding object against Cereno's interrogating subject —he becomes the "Answer" to Cereno's privileged "Question." This way of orienting the dialogue is especially absurd, given that Hovaugh's quoted response is not a declarative answer, but another question (even then, a mere request for clarification). Why, then, does Hovaugh back down? If we take a cue from Coulthard's analysis of political recognition and consider the exchange as one not just of words but also of power gestures, the possibility emerges that Hovaugh's own seat of authority as a medical doctor gives him a stake in recognizing Cereno's superior authority. As with his subsequent encounter with the Canadian border patrolman, the irony is that Hovaugh's acquiescence to the established hierarchy of authority does not so much diminish his own individual authority as it feeds back into the hierarchy as a broader structural given. Again, by recognizing Cereno's position of privilege as the writer-recorder of the exchange, Hovaugh reaffirms a field of power relations that ultimately benefits everyone who occupies dominant positions within some segment of said field, himself included.

If dialogue in the Babo-Hovaugh-Cereno storyline tends to function as a kind of micro-level performance of the macro-political exchanges of power gestures between institutions, then the protracted dialogue between Eli Stands Alone and Duplessis International

10 Here and elsewhere, I make use of Deleuze and Guattari's evocative concept of a "line of flight:" those outlets which are present in every multiplicity and "according to which [the multiplicity can] change in nature and connect with other multiplicities" (9). I appreciate this concept because it insists that there are always means of escape built into any particular set of circumstances —or *assemblage*— and that the means of escape also create an opportunity to transform and expand said set of circumstances.

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Associates,[11] namely via its legal representative Clifford Sifton,[12] functions as a micro-level distillation of the Western legal process in a way that likewise draws attention to its paradoxical inefficiency. From the outset, King makes it clear that the legal battle between Eli, who refuses to vacate his mother's cabin to make way for the opening of a dam that has already been built, and the company begins and ends in a stalemate born from a begrudging formality:

> It was always the same argument. Always the same topic. *Stands Alone v. Duplessis International Associates*. The case was ten years old, had started before Charlie had even been accepted to law school. And the way things were going, it would be in the courts for another ten years. (116)

Indeed, Charlie Looking Bear subsequently defends his role as Duplessis' token Indian mouthpiece along similarly pessimistic lines, arguing to Alberta, "Look, where's the harm? The case will probably be in the courts long after we're dead. I mean, the dam is there. The lake is there. You can't make them go away" (117). What Charlie's perspective does in both passages is to expose the ironic simultaneity of settlement and repetition in Duplessis' endeavour to control the outcome of the situation. On the one hand, Duplessis' version of the narrative presupposes that the matter is in fact already settled: not only has the dam been built, but the lake, which will not technically exist until the dam floods the surrounding lands, is already "there" and won't "go away." On the other hand, Duplessis' authority to enforce this narrative, thanks to Eli's refusal, predicates upon the need to continuously reiterate and defend that narrative in the courts. As a result, the discussion is doomed to repeat "always the same argument" and "always the same topic" until "long after we're dead." Duplessis' authority to shape the legislative dialogue, then, is built on a convenient paradox: how can a matter be both settled and in-progress?

The ensuing face-to-face dialogue between Eli and Clifford Sifton, which spans nearly thirty non-consecutive pages and encompasses flashbacks stemming back ten years, illustrates how all of this legislative maneuvering translates into Beckettian levels of absurdity on the interpersonal front. Ten years into the standoff, we find that the discussion has been repeated to the point where its scriptedness has become unavoidably transparent to everyone involved. At one point, Sifton speaks to how the case is merely another chapter in an ongoing historical and political stalemate:

> [Sifton:] "And so because the government felt generous back in the last ice age, and made promises it never intended to keep, I have to come by every morning and ask the same stupid question."
> [Eli:] "And I say no."
> "You know you're going to say no, and I know you're going to say no. Hell, the whole damn world knows you're going to say no. Might as well put it on television."
> "So why come?" (138)

Eli's curt responses here are crucial, yet they seem to fall on deaf ears when Sifton jokingly replies, "Because you make the best damn coffee. And because I like the walk." This recourse to coy humour can mean at least three things: that Sifton derives palpable enjoyment from Duplessis' ongoing attempts to consign Eli's refusal to the unsayable, that this sense of enjoyment is itself part of the script,[13] and/or that (in a less insidious sense) Sifton is gradually developing a sense of grounded connection to the Stands Alone family's cabin that is comparable to Eli's.[14] In any case, Eli's refusal to consent remains vexing not only to Duplessis' current imperative, but to Sifton's underlying sense of how Indigenous peoples fit into the narrative of Western progress:

> [Sifton:] "You know, I always thought Indians were elegant speakers."
> [Eli:] "Storm's coming."
> "But all you ever say is no. I come by every day and read that thing those lawyers thought up about voluntarily extinguishing your right to this house and the land it sits on, and all you ever say is no."
> "Be here by tonight."
> "I mean, no isn't exactly elegant, now is it?
> "Maybe get some hail, too." (137)

11 A reference to Maurice Duplessis, the staunchly Catholic, pro-business, and anti-union Premier of Quebec whose draconian reign from 1936-59 has become popularly known as "La Grande Noirceur."

12 A reference to Sir Clifford Sifton, the Canadian Minister of the Interior from 1896-1900 who presided over the creation of the provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan, as well as the massive influx of Eastern-European immigrants that is credited with "settling" western Canada.

13 These first two possibilities recall Homi Bhabha's reference (borrowing, like Coulthard, from Fanon) to the "disciplinary and 'pleasurable'" function of an objectifying surveillance which contains its own "simultaneously alienating and hence potentially confrontational" problematics (109-110).

14 Although we can only speculate as to how true it may be, this third possibility is especially satisfying insofar as it means that Eli's ongoing refusals generate unanticipated results, namely Sifton's gradual and perhaps unwitting attachment to the cabin and, by ironic extension, to Eli and his cause.

Unwittingly, Sifton unpacks the question of how Eli *should* speak according to various nested assumptions. The first is that Duplessis' ongoing demand for Eli to "voluntarily extinguish" his claim to the land is one which deliberately restricts the range of potential responses it can accept, consigning Eli to one of two roles: either that of the pliant volunteer or that of the stubborn refuser. The second is that Eli, by virtue of his positionality as an "Indian," can only speak in a way that fits him into a predetermined narrative of Indigenous erasure. One prong of this assumption manifests in Sifton's ironic misuse of the term "elegant." Contrary to what Sifton believes, Eli's simple and consistent answer of "no" could not be more elegant. Sifton, perhaps confusing *elegance* with *eloquence*, evokes the stereotype of the well-spoken poeticizing Indian to express his own inability to understand Eli's curt refusals. The other prong of this assumption consists in another irony: that Eli as an Indian should both stand down to *and* put up a fight against the march of progress. The expectation, which is already built into Duplessis' line of questioning, is that Eli should and will acquiesce, but also, in keeping with the pleasurable function of the script, that said acquiescence will provide a suitably romantic climax to the established narrative —that Eli, in the spirit of Crazy Horse's alleged war cry of "Today is a good day to die," will go down in a picture-perfect, speechifying blaze of glory. Eli's "no," then, is therefore doubly vexing for Sifton, since it is neither conciliatory nor eloquent, and altogether unacceptable for Duplessis, who use their litigious authority to keep Eli's refusal confined to the unsayable.

As committed as the novel is to making light of the innumerable institutional and interpersonal roadblocks to reciprocating dialogue, *Green Grass, Running Water* is not without some more hopeful lines of flight. Whereas the "generative" aspect of "generative refusal" can be tough to imagine in the stalemates that greet Babo and Eli, the storyline(s) involving the Four Old Indians paint a more complete picture of how refusal and affirmation can operate in tandem to facilitate egalitarian and consensual exchanges of dialogue. If refusal is only generative for Audra and Leanne Simpson insofar as *something else* is affirmed in the process of refusing, *Green Grass, Running Water*'s affirmations work by foregrounding the acts of turn-sharing and turn-taking as vital components of reciprocal engagement. In the opening pages of the novel, the Four Old Indians (whose nicknames make ironic reference to four archetypal colonial "heroes" of the American colonial imagination: the titular character of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*; Ishmael, the erudite narrator of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*; Natty "Hawkeye" Bumppo from James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*; and the titular masked vigilante of *The Lone Ranger* radio, television, and film series) make a point of negotiating the turn-taking process as their first act upon escaping from Dr. Hovaugh's hospital:

> "Whose turn is it?" said Ishmael.
> "Mine," said the Lone Ranger.
> "Are you sure?" said Robinson Crusoe. "Maybe it's Hawkeye's turn."
> "No," said the Lone Ranger. "Hawkeye has already had a turn."
> "Maybe it's Ishmael's turn."
> "Ready," said the Lone Ranger. "Here we go." (9-10)

Although the process gets off to something of a rough start, with the Lone Ranger effectively hijacking the spotlight before the others can make sense of whose turn it is, the Old Indians establish a precedent —or, taking the cyclical continuity of the narrative into account, invoke an existing precedent— of sharing and taking turns to tell their own versions of the Creation Stories. While the Lone Ranger takes the reins in this specific instance, Ishmael, Robinson Crusoe, and Hawkeye nonetheless play a crucial role in holding the Lone Ranger accountable for how the turn plays out, first by asking questions like "Are you sure?" and "Maybe it's Ishmael's turn" and later by offering to correct the Lone Ranger when they notice that the storytelling process is not being respected. To the latter purpose, pages 11 to 15 are taken up by a series of false starts:

> "*Once upon a time…*" [said the Lone Ranger.]
> "What are you doing?" said Hawkeye.
> "Okay, I'll begin again," said the Lone Ranger.
> "Okay," said Ishmael.
> "Okay," said Robinson Crusoe.
> "Okay," said Hawkeye. (11)
>
> "Wait a minute," said Robinson Crusoe.
> "Yes?" [said the Lone Ranger.]
> "That's the wrong story," said Ishmael. "That story comes later."
> "But it's my turn," said the Lone Ranger.
> "But you have to get it right," said Hawkeye.
> "And," said Robinson Crusoe, "you can't tell it all by yourself." (14)

Each of these false starts involves the need for all of the listeners to give their consent to the story before the teller can continue. Consequently, repetition becomes a key feature of the Old Indians' interactions. It is not before all four of them have said "Okay," for one, that the Long Ranger may try to begin the story again; even then, it takes another four tries

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before the group gives their full consent. The process of telling and listening to a story is therefore not unidirectional but interactive. Although it is the Lone Ranger's "turn" to speak, the listeners' role remains vital to the extent that the speaker "can't tell it all by [them]self." As Audra Simpson reminds us, the price of redundancy and demobilization, which comes with the ability to refuse consent in the short term, is offset by the assertion of a reciprocal, consensual, and egalitarian basis of engagement in the long term.

As far as (meta)literary engagement is concerned, lastly, the Four Old Indians' slow but mutually-consensual storytelling practice also provides a model for how we might grapple with some of the conceptual loose ends and limitations that come with story, script, and discourse. The critical debates as to how to listen responsibly to Indigenous writing —and perhaps any writing— are too sprawling and ongoing to rehearse in full, but some of their insights can be useful for our purposes here. Susan Berry Brill de Ramírez, speaking to the central problem that Indigenous peoples "have just not been listened to, not been heard, not been understood," begins by making a helpful distinction between discourse and conversation (158). "Discursive power," she explains, "is fundamentally oppositional. It is always a power over some 'other' who is necessarily disempowered through an objectification that denies his or her subjective reality as a person in the world" (165). Conversive power, by contrast, "is never a power *over* but rather a power *with*" (173 emphasis in original). Brill de Ramírez's key intervention, though, is not to situate discourse and conversation as mutually-exclusive processes, but to advocate for a "fluid continuum" of what she calls "conversive discursivity" that can allow for cultures to move towards transformative reciprocity without the risk of erasing the diversity and distinctiveness of subjective difference (199). This gesture of placing discourse and conversation along a spectrum is crucial insofar as it curbs the temptation to reinvoke the tired binaries of European-Indigenous, written-oral, and subjective-objective.

Furthermore, by insisting that all linguistic exchanges are in some way discursive and that no form of exchange can be perfectly conversive, Brill de Ramírez's conversive-discursive spectrum reminds us that dialogue will always retain some element of scriptedness. As listeners and speakers, we have a range of choice as to what extent we allow our exchanges to remain scripted *and* to allow space for unpredictable transformation. The challenge, which plays out amicably between the Four Old Indians in the novel, is to achieve or at least imagine a balance that minimizes asymmetry, enables reciprocity, and shifts the impetus away from a prescribed outcome. To reiterate: this is a difficulty that affects all positions along the socio-political ladder in some way. The problem with political recognition in Coulthard's argument, for instance, is that the settler-state's gesture is invasive, unilateral, and prescriptive —it extends its power *over* and *into* First Peoples with an eye fixed upon a pre-scripted outcome. The alternative, however, cannot be to eliminate power and scriptedness entirely. Rather, to borrow Coulthard's Fanonian vocabulary, the alternative must be to reimagine the field of power that dialogue creates in order to diminish the invasive, unilateral, and prescriptive elements of discursivity and to restore the processual, reciprocal, and transformative potential of conversivity.

Thus, when Ishmael and Hawkeye interject to insist that there is still such a thing as "the wrong story" and that the teller has "to get it right," we can see how the friction between discursivity and conversivity is irresolvable, but also potentially generative. In some sense, the Old Indians' negotiation of the turn-taking process arguably shares something with Sergeant Cereno's interrogation tactics and Clifford Sifton's repeated visits to Eli Stands Alone's cabin. In each case, there remains some level of commitment to a given script.[15] Yet the distinctions between the Old Indians' mode of engagement and Cereno's or Sifton's are crucial, if subtle. Whereas Cereno conflates the authority to "ask the questions" with the authority to direct the conversation as a whole, the Old Indians negotiate the turn-taking process so that the designated speaker remains accountable to the listeners' right to ask questions and to give consent. Whereas Sifton answers Eli's refusals by continuing to make the same demands, the Lone Ranger answers the others' interjections by trying out different beginnings until mutual consent is reached. The difference, in other words, is that while scriptedness persists as a necessary part of the equation, the Old Indians set an example for reciprocal engagement by privileging consent and mutuality to minimize the moment-to-moment asymmetries that inevitably transpire between listener and speaker. King's vision of a generative refusal to listen, in brief, involves the commitment to respecting a process of engagement which affords equal agency to both listener and speaker.

What Thomas King has let me begin to understand is that to truly listen and speak to others is an inherently scary task, insofar as to respect the process of listening is to put oneself in a position to be transformed. It is only by remaining open to transformation by those with whom we engage that listening and speaking can occur in any meaningful sense. There are a number of reasons why this is scary. For starters, as I've hoped to establish in this paper, our social and political institutions are generally structured in terms of asymmetry rather than reciprocity. One side of that coin is that we, as we circulate within and learn from that network of institutions, become accustomed to and often dependent upon those

15 This is also the case with the various dialogues between the "I" narrator and Coyote, where the narrator has to constantly remind Coyote to "Pay attention" to the story being told "or we'll have to do this again" (104).

asymmetries. There is a sense of security that comes with modes of engagement that are prescriptive and geared towards a predictable outcome, as opposed to the transformative and unpredictable process of engaging others on a reciprocal and egalitarian basis. The other side of the coin, for that matter, is that asymmetry also ensures that certain positions and roles retain a sense of privilege and authority when it comes to shaping the ways in which we exchange dialogues. Not only do individuals achieve a sense of security in asymmetry, but institutions of power achieve a sense of security in their ability to restrict the possibility of transformation —Canada offers the promise of "reconciliation"; courts of law offer the promise of "due process" and "free speech"; education systems offer the promise of creating responsible citizens; and so on.

Novels like *Green Grass, Running Water*, though, are not just a diagnostic gauge of how misguided we can be when it comes to listening and speaking to one another; they are reminders of potential ways in which we can recover from our shortfalls. In *Green Grass, Running Water*, the line of flight that emerges is akin to what Audra and Leanne Simpson would call a generative refusal to listen, in which the gesture of refusing to listen to a pre-scripted exchange enables the listener to short-circuit the dialogue at-hand, to draw attention to the asymmetries which structure the dialogue, and to create an occasion for resetting and recalibrating the ways in which the participants can negotiate their differences. In King's writing, I see not just a methodological framework for engaging meaningfully with First Peoples' issues and texts, but also vital and tangible ways of reimagining our responsibilities to one another as both listeners and speakers.

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