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Resisting Predetermined Identities and Environmental Destruction: Negotiating Cultural Encounters in Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water*

The present paper contributes to the growing interest within North American studies and ecocritical studies in particular, in the systematic environmental destruction and appropriation of Native Canadian land by settler capitalist schemes. It also touches upon issues of active resistance led by Native communities for the reclamation of Native land. The paper undertakes an ecocritical analysis of the novel *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993) by Native Canadian author Thomas King. The focus is centered on Rob Nixon's influential concept of 'slow violence' as well as on the intricate relations that can be traced in Native Canadian literature between environmental pollution, epistemic violence, identity negotiation as well as active collaboration in Native communities for the resistance against these complex manifestations of slow and epistemic violence. More specifically, Nixon's seminal work is utilized in this paper for the investigation of King's rich commentary on the construction of a dam which constitutes a predominant form of slow violence that undermines the Native community's authority and cultural practices.

Keywords: slow violence; environment; resistance; Native communities; Thomas King

Green Grass, Running Water (1993) is considered to be one of Thomas King's most popular literary productions. This novel has been primarily examined in terms of its storytelling strategies, as well as its rich configuration of the Native trickster tradition. What has been less examined by most critics is the importance of the novel's climax, namely the destruction of the Grand Baleen Dam, in the fictional Blossom Reserve in Alberta. This paper undertakes an ecocritical analysis of the symbolic destruction of this man-made construction which is regarded as a form of

slow violence, a concept introduced by Rob Nixon. Nixon's concept is employed in the present paper for the analysis of King's narrative in relation to concerns of environmental destruction and communal disempowerment, as the dam obstructs and affects the local fishing and traditional cultural practices of the Blossom reserve. Following the dynamic character of Eli Stands Alone, the elderly Native academic who returns back to his ancestral land and community to put a halt to Duplessis' schemes, the paper explores the importance of assuming agency and countering neocolonial practices that can gravely affect a Native community, as the specific character actively opposes the Grand Baleen Dam's construction and expansion in Native land. This paper further argues that King's emphasis on the destruction of the dam through the intervention of the mythical figure of Coyote and the four elders, that aims to restore the local Native community's wellbeing, underlines the importance of storytelling and cultural heritage in promoting agency and resistance against neocolonial capitalist schemes.

Slow Violence and the Appropriation of Native Land

The first instance whereby the reader becomes familiar with the Grand Baleen Dam is in the second part of the novel narrated by Ishmael, one of the four Native elders. More specifically, King introduces the character of Eli Stands Alone, an elderly academic. It is interesting that this character is firstly presented arguing with Clifford Sifton, the designer of the dam. In particular, as the two characters are discussing the dam, Sifton asks Eli about this year's fishing outcomes and Eli's response is that it would "be better if your dam wasn't there" (119). The creation of a dam may appear to the unsuspecting reader as a harmless innovative technological intervention, and not as a form of environmental injustice. Yet as ecocritical studies specialist Rob Nixon has influentially argued "Ours is an age of onrushing turbo-capitalism [...]. Consequently, one of the most pressing challenges of our age is how to adjust our rapidly eroding attention spans to the slow erosions of environmental justice" (8). In *Green Grass, Running Water* King undertakes through the character of Eli Stands Alone to prove how the construction of the Grand Baleen Dam constitutes a predominant form of slow violence, even though its designer presents it as inconspicuous and unobtrusive. In particular, Sifton's response to Eli that "that's the beauty of dams [...] they don't have politics" (119–120) is what provokes Eli's mockery and criticism as he asks the other man "so

how come so many of them are built on Indian land?” (120). In the argument between Eli and Sifton, the latter’s nonchalant answer (“they don’t have politics”) comes to represent settler, capitalist mentality, which pays little notice to the well-being of the local Native community and equally so to the physical cosmos. On the other hand, Eli’s critical questioning of the location chosen to build the dam reflects his justified anxiety about the community’s claims to the land.

Christopher Schliephake has argued that “Literature [...] can stage social issues, political shortcomings, and cultural blind spots in a depragmatized medium and [...] integrate marginalized, forgotten or entirely new aspects into our common systems of knowledge” (571). In the case of *Green Grass, Running Water*, King’s narrative illustrates how even the creation of a dam can constitute a form of violence towards an already marginalized cultural group such as the Blackfoot community in this case. It thus stages a relevant, social issue, bringing into the light a form of violence, which might otherwise remain unnoticed. The dam in King’s *Green Grass, Running Water* is presented by Sifton and the corporation as a promising, beneficial construction that can supposedly aid the community’s economy. However, Eli undermines Sifton’s rhetoric as he insists that according to the official papers regarding the dam’s creation, “none of the recommended sites was on Indian land” (120). In this way Eli, underlines that it is Native land that is ultimately chosen for the assigned location. Eli appears right from the start to take responsibility for the well-being of his community, as he has filed a lawsuit “that forbade Duplessis from raising or lowering the level of the river beyond a certain point” (286). This initiative is interesting, given the fact that the character had abandoned the reserve in his youth in order to lead an academic life in Toronto. This lack of connection to his maternal land is contrary to the initiative he displays after he returns to Blossom. In particular, the omniscient narrator describes that Eli feels initially alienated from his community when he returns to the reserve after his wife’s death. Eli appears to oscillate between a sense of non-belonging and belonging, before he undertakes to challenge the corporation’s authority. More specifically, he remembers encountering “people who looked at him suspiciously, as though he were a stranger, a tourist who had somehow sneaked into the camp” (287), making him feel the impact of his long absence. Despite this initial lack of belonging, Eli manages to become an active agent in his community after he takes residence in his mother’s old cabin.

Eli’s transformation into an active member of his community and display of opposition against the disempowerment of his community, can

be traced to his gradual reconnection to his maternal land. In his essay on *Green Grass, Running Water*, Carlton Smith stresses that “Eli’s own story of renewal – his acquired ability to imagine different possibilities in what once seemed to be a circumscribed future – is revealed through a series of stories that hold the key to his emancipation” (529). Indeed, these stories which are in effect Eli’s memories, portray the character’s gradual reintegration within the reserve, driven by his sense of responsibility to the community. These stories enable Eli to envision a possibility where the local Native community is not disempowered by the construction of the dam, as Smith outlines. In particular, Eli’s first memory upon his return is that of “bulldozers and semi trucks and a couple of portable offices” (122). He observes these symbols of his land’s violation while he considers how “his mother had built this house. Log by log [she] had dragged each one out of that small stand of timber” (122). This detailed memory of the cabin’s creation is indicative of the way Eli as a character is emancipated by his feeling of non-belonging. It becomes clear that the cabin offers him a physical and emotional anchor to Blossom. Furthermore, the senior academic’s high degree of agency is what brings him closer to his land and what reinforces him to renegotiate his role within his community. The traditional cabin which is bequeathed to Eli by his mother, constitutes a part of the community’s cultural heritage. It also represents Native effort to survive in the contemporary adverse conditions of settler capitalist expansion. In his study “Feeling the Fires of Climate Change: Land Affect in Canada’s Tar Sands,” Jobb Arnold stresses that there are many “Indigenous peoples [who] continue to actively oppose the systematic violence being done to the land, which goes hand-in-hand with the annihilation of their culture” (101). Indeed, Eli’s legal battle with Duplessis can be regarded as such an effort which seeks to resist the undermining of the community’s spatial and cultural self-determination. The dam constitutes a threat towards the community’s prosperity, for it obstructs traditional practices like that of fishing in the river. Thus, Eli’s contestation of the corporation’s expansion can be perceived as an act of cultural preservation. James Cox observes that “Eli’s resistance takes the form of a daily, ritual conversation with Clifford Sifton, the dam’s architect and the namesake of the Superintendent of Indian Affairs and Interior Minister of Canada from 1896 to 1905” (239). King’s playful employment of historical figures in the novel, such as the case of Clifford Sifton in this instance, allows for a rich symbolic reading of the characters’ traits. Sifton’s naming connotes that he is a man of power like his name’s predecessor, however he appears unable to intimidate the elderly Native

academic. Eli is thus presented as a powerful character who can sufficiently combat Duplessis' capitalist schemes which seek to exploit the Blackfoot territory. In view of this, Eli can be considered the most active human agent in the novel, even though the mythical figures bring about most of the change in the community.

The Employment and Reversal of Cultural Stereotypes: Resisting Epistemic Violence

The cultural encounter between Native and non-Native groups is arguably one of the major concerns of this novel. Schliephake argues that "our perception of a particular environment [...] may be dominated by a certain narrative, but that there are, at the same time, multiple accounts of the history written into it that can be unearthed and that can run counter to each other" (576). The novel's multivocal structure indeed allows the reader to bear witness to a number of characters who belong to these co-existing and often competing cultural worldviews. Schliephake's argument that a certain narrative is usually dominant, reflects the reality of the American nation-state where the narratives of marginalized groups, such as Native Americans are usually ignored and need to be 'unearthed.' King discusses this interaction by addressing the four elders' identities. These elders are named Hawkeye, Ishmael, Lone Ranger and Robinson Crusoe adopting the names of popular Western literary works and legends in Coyote's narration of the world's creation. It is gradually revealed that in the beginning of the novel these characters are First Woman, Changing Woman, Thought Woman and Old Woman, all of which are different representations of the Native mythic figure of the creation woman, and that later on they assume the forms of four human elders. The Native mythic figure of the creation woman is the being responsible for the creation of the world according to Native tradition. Darrell Jesse Peters stresses that the "Christian based, Western narratives [...] want these Native American characters to assume familiar roles, preconceived roles demanding that Indians be stoic, inferior, and powerless on the tragic path to disappearance" (74). Peters' commentary regarding the elders' espousal of predetermined roles touches upon a profound form of epistemic violence, as these characters are forced to adapt their identities in order to survive in the Western-dominated North American world.

In her seminal work "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Gayatri Spivak describes epistemic violence as the "remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and

heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other. This project is also the asymmetrical obliteration of the trace of that Other in its precarious subjectivity” as she further argues (76). Spivak rightly stresses that the constitution of the colonized as Other is heterogeneous. Indeed, the colonizers in *Green Grass, Running Water* employ a plethora of strategies to force the Native populations into assimilation or even dislocation. First Woman, for instance, whose story is narrated in the first part of the novel, is forced to assume the identity of Lone Ranger. After she is captured by white soldiers in the events of her narration of the creation story, “she puts on her black mask and walks to the front gate” (106). She symbolically puts on a different acceptable identity and the soldiers’ attitude changes immediately: “It’s the Lone Ranger, the guards shout [...] and they open the gate” (106). As the First Woman symbolically walks out, she sheds her Native identity. This scene touches upon Spivak’s obliteration of the Other’s subjectivity, as First Woman’s Native identity vanishes behind the mask. King appears here to be critical of the way white epistemic violence eradicates pride in Native cultural identity, as it forces these cultural groups to assimilation.

The author’s commentary on epistemic violence becomes especially prominent in the event of the four elders’ disappearance from the asylum where they are kept. As soon as they escape from this mental institute, the institute’s head psychiatrist Joseph Hovaugh, tries to persuade Dr. John Eliot to sign the elders’ death certificates despite the complete lack of evidence. Dr. Eliot responds that this is “a little compulsive” (48) and he argues that he needs bodies for the papers to be signed. However, Hovaugh is not fazed by this claim; he rather insists that “they’re dead [...] [a]ll four of them” (49). He keeps on pressuring Dr. Eliot saying “[w]e just need certificates. Heart attack, cancer, old age” (49). Hovaugh’s obsessive effort to proclaim the four characters dead is indicative of his effort to kill off the Other who disturbs his fantasy of cultural domination and superiority. Carrie Sheffield argues in her study on Native American Literatures that, “[g]iven the fact that most Americans see Native Americans as part of a dead and bygone era, it is critical that we begin to recognize the import of decolonization” (24). The white character’s aim to declare the elders dead represents a broader colonial strategy to enforce upon them an artificial, metaphorical, death since immediate extermination of the ‘other’ is no longer an option in the contemporary nation-state of Canada. In this light, it is truly necessary to analyze and reflect on narratives which aim to decolonize and shed light on neocolonial practices that present Native Americans as relics of another era. Furthermore, Kath-

ryn Shanley stresses that “Dr. Hovaugh’s compulsion represents the persistent pathology within American mainstream thought to kill Indians, to have them vanish, to declare them dead when they clearly survive” (39). Indeed, the signing of the death certificates offers Hovaugh an illusion of triumph and control over the Native body that he cannot make possible otherwise, considering that the four rebels have successfully escaped from the asylum and from his control.

Metaphors of epistemic violence abound in the novel, as for example in the case of the destruction of traditional Blackfoot clothes by a border control officer. This incident is narrated by Alberta Frank, a university professor who recounts her youth in the Blossom reserve. In the third part of the novel originally narrated by Robinson Crusoe, that is, *Thought Woman*, the narration follows Alberta describing that when she was thirteen “the family went across the line to Browning” (282), whereby the border guard instructed them to pull aside and for everyone to come into the building. The guard took advantage of his position and he informed Alberta’s family that they “got laws that cover certain things [...] certain kinds of feathers” (283). He then laid the family’s dance outfits down on the road, showing total disrespect for these cultural artifacts. Alberta describes her father, Amos, being agitated as he insisted that he “shouldn’t put the outfits down like that” (284) to which the border guard responded “we’re the ones to say what’s right and what’s not” (284). In their study on the role of borders, both literal and metaphorical, Jennifer Andrews and Priscilla Walton argue that King’s literary works “highlight the complex role of Canada as well as the US in upholding the borders that delimit the identity and belonging of indigenous peoples” (600). Indeed, the border in Browning restricts the family from using their dance outfits which are markers of their identity. Furthermore, the guard’s conduct in the above scene is indicative of his illusion of cultural superiority and colonial authority. This scene illustrates how the American nation-state systematically enforces laws that aim to devalue Blackfoot cultural artifacts, in an effort to promote its own white settler culture.

King provides these and many more instances of epistemic violence along with a number of powerful examples of resistance which challenge both common stereotypes about Native peoples and this systematic violence. King provides a highly symbolic example of deconstructing epistemic violence: the modification of a popular, but unnamed John Wayne western by Coyote and the four elders. This event takes place in Bill Bursum’s electric appliances shop. Bill Bursum is the employer of the main character Lionel. After the four elders, Charlie Looking Bear, and Eli

Stands Alone gather in the shop to wish Lionel happy birthday, Bursum encourages them to watch the John Wayne film. In this film the Native warriors are supposed to lose to the white cowboys. However, the four elders intervene because they consider that the director “didn’t get it right the first time” (351). Indeed, Hawkeye explains that they “fixed it for him” (352). This incident is a significant intervention because westerns constitute a part of white colonial epistemology. Westerns represent for white Americans their successful expansion in Native territory and the Native population’s consequent spatial and cultural retreat. Roman Bartosch argues that “postcolonial literature stages and emplots fundamental tensions and contradictions, and interpreting these texts highlights one’s share in the conflictual conditions of crisis” (71). King’s narrative presents the tension between white American and Native American cultural products and, in particular, it explores ways in which the dominant white American cultural viewpoint can be contested and even reversed so that the oppressed Native American voice can become more powerful. In this light, King’s narrative offers a different perspective of the aforementioned cultural crisis and conflict, as Bartosch argues in relation to postcolonial literature. Indeed, the elders not only interpret but correct the film’s “initial misrepresentations” by altering the film’s ending: the Native warriors now beat the American troops, and, thus, metaphorically destabilize the colonial myth of the ever-powerful American military. In this way, the tension lying within the Native and non-Native cultural encounter is carefully brought under scrutiny in this humorous and masterful scene.

The characters watch entranced as the Native warriors “began to shoot back, and soldiers began falling over [while] John Wayne looked down and stared stupidly at the arrow in his thigh, shaking his head in [...] disbelief” (358). In his study on *Green Grass, Running Water* Smith stresses that “King’s Coyote intervenes at the level of perception, and challenges us to conceive of new, even audacious possibilities [...] [such as] the subversive reversal of the culturally resonant image of John Wayne felling Indians” (516). It is true that the film’s purposeful alteration promotes a vastly different representation of Native people than the white canonical narrative of western films. The film’s symbolic cultural reversal succeeds in providing the characters with a feeling of hope and optimism for a more culturally resilient and resistant community. Lionel further underlines the essence of this modification by reflecting that “Bursum loved his Westerns [as] every one was the same as the others. Predictable” (353). This is the case because Native people are stereotypically supposed to lose in the end, and the roles are designed to fit the narrow conviction that

Native culture is slowly moving towards extinction. Therefore, the elders and Coyote's intervention is significant in that it challenges the dominant western epistemological framework which aims to perpetuate the myth of the failing and decaying 'Indian,' and to delimit active resistance in Native communities.

From Identity Crisis to Agency and Empowerment: The Sun Dance Festival

One of the main concerns of *Green Grass, Running Water* is the impact epistemic and slow violence has on the identity formation of Native Canadian subjects. The difficulties of negotiating a contemporary Native identity on the reserve are best reflected in the case of Lionel Red Dog. Sheffield argues that the "grounding of characters in the modern world side-steps the issue of authenticity and focuses on what is truly important – how to go about regaining sovereignty and decolonization in the contemporary world" (67). Indeed, through the main character of Lionel, the text explores different forms of belonging and agency against forms of violence, rather than on tracing questions of authenticity. As Sheffield highlights, the concerns of sovereignty and decolonization are pressing issues to be addressed and in King's narrative this is achieved through the gradual transformation of the complex character that Lionel represents. Lionel is initially described as a passive character who hesitates to make any impactful decisions that may alter his life and the community's well-being. In the first chapter of the novel, Lionel appears to satirize the local council's decision to pave the central road by inquiring whether they have "run out of dirt and gravel" (7). His satire targets the decay that has taken over the Blossom reserve implying that little effort is being made to improve the quality of life on the reserve. This commentary drives his aunt Norma to accuse him of being similar to a white man "like the politicians in Edmonton [...] always telling us what we can't do" (8). Norma's accusation addresses the fact that Lionel usually refuses to assume any form of agency but, rather, persists on accentuating the futility of his life choices. Norma is convinced that her nephew needs to offer more to the community, as she explains to the four elders that "the world could sure use some help [...] but these young people just don't listen to us" (133), inferring that Lionel is one of these young people.

Throughout the novel, Lionel finds it difficult to identify with the traditions and every-day practices of his Blackfoot community as he appears

influenced by popular Western cultural values. From a young age he considers John Wayne a role model as he describes that, “by the time he was six, he knew what he wanted to be. John Wayne [...] not the man but the hero” (265). Lionel’s assumption that Wayne constitutes a type of hero in the cinematic narratives in which he kills Natives betrays Lionel’s detachment from his community. It further demonstrates the insidious power of Western media to create representations that can successfully white-wash Native subjects. Throughout the novel, Lionel is caught up in adventures he desperately wishes to avoid. Lionel’s accidental involvement in an American Indian Movement operation constitutes such an eventful adventure. Lionel tries to refuse to follow the rest of the protesters to Wounded Knee. Eventually, Lionel hesitantly follows the protesters in the demonstration, unaware that they are armed (62). After he becomes the target of police brutality in this demonstration, Lionel refrains from any essential act of resistance. He refers to this experience as one of his life’s major mistakes. Greg Bechtel stresses in his essay on *Green Grass, Running Water* that Lionel’s misadventures are “the result of Lionel’s being caught up in the wrong story, a story of mistaken identity” (206). Indeed, Lionel finds it difficult to identify with the traditions and every-day practices of his Blackfoot community as he appears influenced by popular Western cultural values. Consequently, Lionel’s initial lack of resistance can be located in his disinterest and alienation from the bonds that tie him to his community.

As Lionel’s character unfolds more elaborately, his initial lack of agency in favor of his cultural origin undergoes significant change. The transformative process reaches its climax in the event of the Sun Dance festival, as he gains the support and counsel of the four elders and Coyote. The mythical figures’ initiative proves crucial in awakening Lionel’s awareness of the healing properties of communal resistance. More precisely, the four elders along with the trickster see it their task to fix Lionel’s impaired relationship with the Blackfoot community and the cultural values that the community safeguards. The aforementioned modification of the Wayne film by the elders constitutes such an instance of resistance, as this effort aims to expose to Lionel the epistemic violence that is inherent in the politically-interested cultural products which he admires. Another indicative intervention takes place during the Sun Dance festival: As the characters assemble on the reserve for the celebration, George, one of the antagonists, arrives to photograph the event for the newspaper he is employed by. This practice goes against the Blackfoot cultural norms which dictate that photographs are forbidden. George

completely disregards these cultural values claiming that “it’s not exactly sacred [...] more like a campout or a picnic” (420) as he keeps on capturing shots with his hidden camera. This violation of the cultural rules in this scene is surprisingly brought to a halt by the joined effort of Lionel and Eli. Lionel follows the elders as they lead him “to the south side [...] when he saw George, and he began walking faster, closing the distance between himself and his sister” (422–423). Lionel immediately confronts George about the camera hidden in a case, and when George tries to evade the topic, Lionel purposefully instructs the man to “open the case” (424). Eli, the elders, and Coyote quickly come to the aid of Lionel shouting at George to open the case. Empowered by the four elders Lionel advances towards George and he bravely blocks George’s effort to attack Eli. Bechtel underlines the importance of the elders’ influence stressing that “[e]ach Recognition leads to some form of Healing, specifically the healing of broken relationships and broken communities” (217). Indeed, Lionel’s recognition of his responsibility towards his community, is the outcome of the mythical characters’ sustained effort to empower him.

In particular, the elders’ aim is to fix the world by demonstrating to Lionel the need for a strong and resistant community through active and resistant individuals. Alexander Cavanaugh supports that “Indigenous knowledges as a politics of reciprocity also offers a way for Indigenous nations to seek sustainable self-determination that asserts sovereignty within a framework of responsibility rather than rights” (16). Lionel’s newfound agency comes to address this exact need for a recognition of individual and communal responsibility towards one’s cultural past and one’s situated present that can restore the community’s cultural and spatial sovereignty. The novel stresses that individualism, assimilation and pessimism should have no place in contemporary Native Canadian communities. In the meantime, George continues his offensive rant shouting “nobody cares about your little powwow. A bunch of old people and drunks sitting around in tents in the middle of nowhere” (427), in order to intimidate the community. At last, George’s effort to undermine the festival’s value is put to an end when Lionel takes George’s equipment and informs him that “there’s nothing for you here” (427). Apart from protecting the other members of the community, Lionel acquires an unprecedented sense of self-confidence. Lionel’s act of resistance enables him to negotiate his role in the community and to reconsider his line of action through his reclaimed sense of agency.

The event that signals the open-ended climax of the novel is the elders’ successful effort to destroy the predominant form of slow violence

enacted against the Blossom reserve, namely the Grand Baleen Dam which blocks the river. Nixon argues that “imposed official landscapes typically [...] sever webs of accumulated cultural meaning [...] treating the landscape as if it were uninhabited by the living, the unborn, and the animate deceased” (17). The Grand Baleen Dam represents, as discussed before, an indicative form of slow violence that affects the Blossom reserve’s commercial and cultural practices. It also threatens the community’s authority over its physical territory. This expression of slow violence is resolved in a rather symbolic fashion right after the completion of the Sun Dance festival. It is the white antagonists Sifton, Hovaugh and Bursum who first become aware of the upcoming earthquake which is going to destroy the dam. Coyote is depicted making fun of them as he wickedly exclaims “Earthquake, Earthquake! [...] Hee-hee-hee-hee [...]” (451) in this satirical foreshadowing. The three antagonists observe “the Nissan, the Pinto and the Karmann-Ghia as [...] the cars were thrown into the dam, hard insistent” (453). All of these cars are revealed to be stolen from their owners by the four elders and Coyote. The impact on the dam is precise and immediate as “Sifton felt a sideways turning, a flexing the snapping crack of concrete and steel [as] [...] the dam gave way, and the water and the cars tumbled over the edge of the world” (454). It is by no means incidental that the dam’s designer becomes the spectator of the climactic event, as the dam collapses and the river returns to its natural course. The elders and Coyote send a clear message to Sifton and Duplessis through their impactful intervention, declaring that no violation of Native land will remain unchallenged.

In her study on “Ecocriticism and Postcolonial Studies,” Mita Banerjee argues that “ecocriticism restores to the land a form of both agency and eloquence” (196) and undoubtedly King’s narrative is influenced by ecocritical concerns about the appropriation of Native land and the efforts to undermine Native Canadian communities. This becomes clear by the novel’s systematic address of slow violence in relation to the land of the fictional Blossom reserve, as well as the great impact land can have on the community’s well-being. Throughout the novel, the mythical figures’ sustained act of resistance enables the characters to conceive of different possibilities for themselves within their community. More specifically, after Eli’s accidental death, Alberta and Norma undertake to rebuild Eli’s cabin after it is damaged during the earthquake, and Lionel decides to help them, thinking “maybe [...] I’ll live in it for a while [...] like Eli” (464). Lionel’s drastic reconnection with his community dramatizes the elders’ arguably most significant achievement considering that “formerly

isolated characters discover that they are in fact (and always have been) a part of a community” (217) as Bechtel points out. Therefore, the trickster and elders’ interventions constitute the main force that drives the action in this novel. The human characters and especially Lionel owe much of their initiative and identity negotiation to the persistent mythical figures who intervene to restore the community’s balance after it is interrupted by white capitalist expansionist appetites. In this light, the novel points out the importance of Native mythical narratives, for the preservation and resistance of Native communities, as these forms of cultural tradition can both inspire and enable the envisioning of a better future. Indeed, the novel’s final scene in fact marks a new beginning following the conventions of traditional Native oral literature, as the mythical figures restart the narration of the creation story with the omniscient narrator beginning “here’s how it happened” (469).

Conclusion

The present paper has investigated how Thomas King’s *Green Grass, Running Water* approaches issues of identity negotiation, epistemic violence, and resistance against assimilation. It has also investigated how the work touches upon issues of land appropriation, land reclamation, and cultural rejuvenation in relation to the predicament of environmental destruction. An ecocritical approach has been followed, in an examination of the ways in which environmental destruction and specifically slow violence, affects the identity formation, cultural practices, and well-being of Native Canadian communities. This paper has examined the resistance led by members of the Blackfoot community in Blossom, Alberta, against the international corporation Duplessis. More specifically, it has been demonstrated that Eli Stands Alone constitutes the most active and responsible member of this community as he has escaped, late in his life, assimilation and returned to the reserve. Emphasis has been placed in the present analysis, on his systematic efforts to legally halt the appropriation of his ancestral land. The process of land appropriation, as represented in the novel, constitutes a form of slow violence performed by the creators of the dam against the Native Blackfoot community in Blossom. Further attention has been paid to the epistemic violence inflicted upon the members of the Blackfoot community and to their consequent efforts to resist such instances of epistemic violence. The deployment of the mythical figures of the trickster Coyote and the four elders who represent four dif-

ferent interpretations of the creation ‘Woman Who Fell from the Sky’ in King’s texts have proved significant. In particular, it has been argued that Coyote and the four elders’ strategies to deconstruct the basis of a stereotypical John Wayne film and especially their intervention to destroy the dam are central initiatives for the contestation of epistemic and slow violence accordingly. Finally, this paper has examined how Lionel manages to assume agency and become a responsible member of his community, thanks to the interventions of the mythical figures.¹

¹ Large parts of this essay were originally written in the context of an MA thesis titled “Negotiating Native Canadian Identity on the Brink of Environmental Destruction: Exploring Thomas King’s *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993) and *The Back of the Turtle* (2014),” submitted to the Department of American Literature and Culture of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki in February 2023, and supervised by Dr Lydia Roupakia. It has since been revised. The full document can be found here: ikee.lib.auth.gr/record/348634/files/?ln=el.

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