

# Outside the Nursing-Home Narrative

## Race and Gender Exclusions in *Green Grass, Running Water*

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Canada has an impressive literary tradition of works set in nursing homes. Key texts (Traill, Wilson, Laurence, Shields, Wright, Barfoot, Munro, Tostevin, Gruen, Hepburn, King) taken from the last century of Canadian English-language publishing, when considered together, illustrate patterns in age-related beliefs and behaviours in Canada and in nursing-home-narrative fiction. The texts include Gothic stories of fear of the nursing home, of aging, and of death; darkly humorous stories featuring empowered residents successfully living within care homes; and fantastical stories of escape from the home and of return to youthful behaviours and preferable habitats (see Life).

This article does not assess the texts included in this literary collection but instead considers what types of texts are absent from literary stories about nursing homes and what types of people are missing from the rosters of nursing homes and other care facilities and services. People such as the four old Indigenous patients depicted in Thomas King's 1993 novel *Green Grass, Running Water* are excluded, feel excluded, and/or exclude themselves from residency in Canadian institutions.

Canada's Multiculturalism Policy was established in 1971 and (according to the current Government of Canada website) purports that "all citizens are equal" and "can keep their identities, can take pride in their ancestry and have a sense of belonging" (Government of Canada, "Canadian Multiculturalism"). However, King's text suggests that the needs of marginalized groups cannot be met by institutions and services that historically have been geared toward mainstream, dominantly white, and Judeo-Christian people.

*Green Grass, Running Water* is an important work of its time for the message it relays regarding Indigenous placement within white institutions and also for its rallying message to the Indigenous community. King's work, alongside that of other artists, has helped to draw attention from both Indigenous and

non-Indigenous readers to the critical issues facing Indigenous peoples.<sup>1</sup> The text offers readers an opportunity to imagine the feelings and the frustrations of living as an Indigenous person in Canada. King contrasts cultural attitudes, particularly in regard to race, religion, gender, aging, and care.

At the end of the decade in which King published *Green Grass, Running Water*, the Canadian government finally closed the last of the residential schools that had been established in the 1800s in order to assimilate Indigenous children into the new Euro-Canadian culture. Although King does not speak openly about the ongoing disagreement between the Indigenous peoples and the Canadian government regarding the schooling of Indigenous children, his text contributed to the political pressure that eventually resulted in the 2007 Indian Residential School Agreement, the 2012 report by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada entitled *They Came for the Children* (Government of Canada, *They Came* 1), and the 2008 formal public apology by Prime Minister Stephen Harper (Miller 2).

The forced residential education endured by a century of Indigenous youth and the consequent injury to Indigenous communities were front-page and festering issues in Canadian society at the time King wrote the text. *Green Grass's* story about the institutionalization of four elders continues to be relevant today because many elders are experiencing pain and disconnection when dealing with the non-Indigenous administration of their late-life care that are similar to what was experienced by the residential-school children of their own and previous generations.

Centralized data on the state of late-life care of Indigenous people in Canada is difficult to obtain because the provinces administer health care while the federal government administers Indigenous matters (Beatty and Berdahl 7). In a 2011 article, Bonita Beulah Beatty and Loleen Berdahl, whose work focuses on the western provinces, express concern that large numbers of Indigenous seniors are being forced to leave rural and northern communities in order to access health-care facilities and services where they are “essentially divorced from familiar contacts with family and community health systems” (2). Reports from care services on the Atlantic side of Canada are similarly negative. The 2010 publication of the Aboriginal Home Care Steering Committee of Nova Scotia introduces the findings of their Home Care on-Reserves Project by reporting that an “overwhelming message coming from the communities is that long-term care is something culturally not accepted and something [Aboriginal people] try to avoid” (5). The steering committee adds that most respondents felt that existing services could never be adapted to meet Aboriginal needs.

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**1** | King is of Cherokee and Greek/German descent. The author of this article is a third-generation Canadian of white Anglo-Saxon Protestant descent.

*Green Grass, Running Water* portrays a community's efforts to preserve and yet adapt its Indigenous lifestyle in a world dominated by non-Indigenous people, and it presents the relative challenges of living on and off the reserve. At the beginning of the novel, four elderly men escape from the mental institution that supposedly has been caring for them but that also has been isolating them from their own land and people. The novel suggests that while white culture sees four useless old men with dementia, Indigenous culture sees wise and capable old leaders who have the ability to transcend earth's limitations with their supernatural powers and provide leadership to their people. They leave the institution in order to resume their place as elders in the Indigenous community and "fix the world" (123). By allowing readers to see into the integrated and complex community of the Indigenous people in the story and to witness the respect afforded the four seniors, the novel suggests that white and Indigenous cultural differences are too great to expect or allow Indigenous elders to be cared for by white administrations. By extension, the novel suggests that white culture does not have the understanding or capacity to govern the Indigenous at all. When King's characters walk away from a hospital where the administrator has either cared for them or imprisoned them, depending on whom one asks, they are escaping not just from an institution but from the dominant Judeo-Christian culture that they believe is responsible for breaking their world (2).

The nursing-home-narrative genre in Canada tells stories about white straight people of Judeo-Christian and Anglo-Saxon descent living in nursing homes that they may or may not be willing to call home. King's text considers the people who have excluded themselves, have been excluded, or who have felt excluded from living in white institutional care, either because their ideology precludes residency or because they are deemed unentitled by typical care-facility cultures. King's endowing of the four protagonists with otherworldly attributes, his use of myths taken from Indigenous culture, multiple narrative voices, and postmodern reflexivity combine to create a fantastical, entertaining, yet thought-provoking text with both magic realist and oral narrative characteristics. However, race, and in particular Indigeneity, is his primary focus. King makes fun of all of his characters, including the Indigenous ones, but he sends cutting verbal barbs toward Western culture and its history of persecution of Indigenous peoples.

Through its escape narrative, the novel changes the four protagonists' roles from passive to active, metaphorically suggesting the wrongful imprisonment of Indigenous peoples in places like reserves, white misunderstanding of Indigenous knowledge, and the challenges Indigenous peoples have in attempting to remain true to their own identity while caged within a world run by white cultures and governments. Although the four seniors are at the centre of the plot, there are numerous story threads dealing with other characters. The entire

community of mythical and realist characters representing Indigenous peoples together acts as protagonist in conflict with white people and their culture. King's title references the US government's promise to respect Indigenous peoples' rights to their land "as long as the grass is green and the water runs." Bernholz et al. state that the source of this phrase is Article 5 of the *Treaty with the Comanches and Other Tribes and Bands*, dated 12 August 1861, which states that "[e]ach tribe or band shall have the right to possess, occupy, and use the reserve allotted to it, as long as grass shall grow and water run, and the reserves shall be their own property like their horses and cattle" (1). Patricia Linton has aptly explained that the "title of the novel is itself a metonymic allusion to the bad faith that separates Native and European Americans. It is a coded reminder of a history of appropriation and the instability of European intentions" (217). King tells an amusing story about four Indigenous elders who escape from a white institution and return home to their land, to their rightful position, and to the embrace of their own community, but he also writes of a dark truth and the deeply felt desire of real-world Indigenous peoples to hold members of white culture to their promises.

Linton argues that the novel requires that "the truly competent reader is a member of a narrow group who, like the narrator, has insider-status in two cultural realms" (214). The non-Indigenous reader can appreciate many aspects of the text, but King makes exclusion clear by such techniques as the insertion of chapter headings in Cherokee<sup>2</sup> with no translation readily available.<sup>3</sup> The text's intriguing complexity has prompted a flurry of illuminating critical interpretations.

The plot of the novel is, to say the least, complex. As Greg Bechtel writes, there are "two distinct narrative streams within the text: a realistic, linear story of contemporary Blackfoot characters in an identifiably real-world setting, and a series of four Native myths that initially appear unconnected to the realm of the everyday" (1). The four old men participate in both narrative streams, thus connecting all the stories and indicating a comfortable and ongoing coexistence of material and spiritual worlds. When interviewed by the authorities following the elders' disappearance, mental institution employee Babo insists that they are "four, five hundred years old" (51), which suggests that, while they exist in the novel's real world, they also incorporate ancestors from the spirit

**2** | The copyright page indicates that the "part title calligraphy" by Chris Costello is in the Cherokee language.

**3** | Linton also argues that the text seems evasive to many because it addresses "at least four different categories of readers with some claim to insider knowledge," and any one reader would require knowledge of all four fields in order to access it fully. In brief, these categories are Indigenous people, feminists, Canadians, and literary and historical scholars (226).

world who walk alongside their descendants on earth and continue to provide them with assistance, a common trope in Indigenous cultural productions and a significant factor in Indigenous religions.

These four elders take turns narrating various versions of the stories along with the trickster Coyote and a sixth narrator referred to only as “I,” effectively suggesting Indigenous oral storytelling traditions. The four old men lampoon historical accounts, creative literature, and Judeo-Christianity while assuming the names of four white male heroes of Western culture: the Lone Ranger, Ishmael, Robinson Crusoe, and Hawkeye (9). The other narrative stream consists of creation-myth variations about four Indigenous women: First Woman, Changing Woman, Thought Woman, and Old Woman (39, 104, 232, 328). King’s blending of the two narrative streams unites the mythical stories of the distant past with stories of the more recent past. The eventual blending of the narrative streams into the new contemporary story suggests a similarity between residency in the mental hospital and incarceration in Fort Marion, a prison in Florida to which the US army sent any Indigenous “leaders opposed to the reservation system” in 1874 (18, 397). The novel’s combining of the image of the hospital and the image of the prison metaphorically suggests that Indigenous peoples feel a type of imprisonment living within white society.

The eventual juxtaposition of the narrative streams also blends the identities of the four old men into those of the four women. When interviewed by Sergeant Cereno about the “escapees” from the hospital, employee Babo reports that “they were women, not men,” disputing his claim that the “files say the Indians were men” (53). This inconsistency contrasts white privileging of written fact and Indigenous privileging of oral knowledge and the flexibility of its truths. It also suggests that the old women may have been attempting to masquerade as men, which in turn references the exacerbated injuries that can result when people’s identities involve multiple layers of otherness, such as being Indigenous, female, and old. The text references the felt need by Indigenous people to attempt to “pass” or survive within white culture by denying their heritage and pretending to be something acceptable to white society. Readers could also interpret this confusion over identity as referencing an inability on the part of white culture to accurately perceive the Indigenous, or they could alternatively interpret an elusiveness or preference for vague representation on the part of the Indigenous. Or this confusing portrayal could be a deliberate attempt by King to challenge Eurocentric preferences for binaries. King’s prose is merely suggestive in these areas.

Eventually, the four oppressed women/men and their mythical world merge with the real world when the renamed mental patients magically “fix the world” – at least a little – by intervening in the life of the Lone Ranger’s misguided “grandson” Lionel, by helping their descendants to assemble again as a community at the Sun Dance, and by reversing some of the humiliation

felt by Indigenous peoples by, for example, using historiographic metafictional techniques such as refilming a movie battle to show the Indigenous warriors defeating cowboy John Wayne (125, 322).

In King's fictional world, the aged ancestors are not incompetent male mental patients but rather knowledgeable yet humble elders out to "fix the world." The four repeat this line a number of times: "We're not on vacation ... We're working ... We're trying to fix up the world"; "It's a lot of work fixing up this world, you know," said the Lone Ranger"; and "We are trying to fix the world" (123, 416, 418). Although they are presented in a humorous fashion and make mistakes, King indicates that they do have power to effect change. For instance, they talk to the trickster god Coyote and are granted his cooperation in starting an earthquake to get them to the other side of Big Muddy River (418).

The old men leave to "fix the world," but they also leave because the facility is a non-home that isolates them from their own Indigenous community. King lampoons white care options by creating the most powerful overbearing administrator of all.<sup>4</sup> He names the administrator "Dr. Joe Hovaugh," a play on the name Jehovah, thereby critiquing white care institutions by suggesting that Indigenous peoples are forced to live within a culture that is based on the Christian religion rather than on Indigenous spiritual traditions. King belittles Judeo-Christian mythology just as Judeo-Christians have belittled Indigenous mythology. The novel includes the following line at the beginning and again at the end, satirizing the Christian creation myth, replacing Jehovah with Joe Hovaugh sitting in a Garden of Eden facsimile: "Dr. Hovaugh sat in his chair behind his desk and looked out at the wall and the trees and the flowers and the swans on the blue-green pond in the garden, and he was pleased" (16, 425).

When he notes that the old residents are missing, Dr. Hovaugh consults with the physician, Dr. John Eliot, a character named after a famous missionary who attempted to convert the Indigenous to Christianity in the 1600s. Hovaugh and Eliot ineffectively muse that the old residents must be dead because "they should have died ... a long time ago" (47), thus making reference to the assumption of many that the Indigenous tribes would eventually die out or be assimilated into white culture. However, Dr. Eliot will not sign death certificates unless Dr. Hovaugh can produce four dead bodies: "What I can't understand is how they escape. And where do they go? Have you ever thought about that Joe? And why, in God's name, would they want to leave?" (48). Here the novel pokes fun at the common white assumption that white culture is superior to Indigenous culture and that surely Indigenous people must realize this truth. King makes it clear that most Indigenous people avoid admission to white institutions such as late-life care facilities, not just because they are made uncomfort-

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**4** | The "overbearing administrator" is a common trope in the nursing-home-narrative genre. See Life.

able due to the racist attitudes encountered there but also because they prefer their own culture and consider it superior to white culture.

King's character Babo Jones, an African American, has been Dr. Hovaugh's employee at the institution for sixteen years, suggesting that King has noticed how frequently white care facilities employ brown- or black-skinned people as workers. The novel suggests that, like the old men, Babo has had white culture thrust upon her. The name "Babo" references an African character who violently resists being made a slave in Herman Melville's "Benito Cereno," a story in which a captain and crew are overpowered by the Africans that they are transporting for the purpose of selling into slavery. The slave Babo "determined to kill his master, Don Alexandro Aranda, both because he and his companions could not otherwise be sure of their liberty, and ... to prepare a warning" (Melville 1107). King provocatively places this volatile character's namesake in the midst of Hovaugh's supposed Garden of Eden. Thus the text is asking how this institution can be seen as a god's ideal garden when there are obvious racial inequities between the management and the employee and inmates. By including the African-American worker Babo in the story alongside the Indigenous residents, King emphasizes the felt racial separateness of Indigenous and African-American peoples and what he considers to be the oblivious ignorance of elite white management. King points out that Indigenous and African-American people lack a respected place in this white institution, or in any white institution for that matter, and that therefore they would rather exclude themselves from white culture. He suggests that white care administrations remain largely oblivious to all the ways in which Indigenous needs differ from mainstream needs.

Discussion of appropriate venues and services for late-life care must extend into a discussion of each person's values, traditions, and prior sense of place. Currently, services are not extended equally to all Canadians because government-administered facilities generally provide care appropriate for the mainstream resident and thus do not cater to the differing needs of those on the margins. The nursing-home-narrative fiction published in Canada depicts homes inhabited primarily by relatively privileged, white Anglo-Saxon Protestant residents. In *The Other Sister*, Lola Lemire Tostevin depicts two Jewish residents, Lena Kohn and Daniel Browne, but in general, residents of white Anglo-Saxon descent are the norm in Canadian nursing-home narratives (see Life).

King makes it clear that Canada is not exempt from the charges of racism he has applied toward the United States. When Babo and Hovaugh cross the border into Canada to look for the old men, the border guard insists that "[a]ll personal property must be registered," thereby blatantly suggesting that Babo is property rather than a person. King then writes: "Babo looked at the American border station and then at the Canadian border station. 'Where did you say we were?' she said." King continues: "'Welcome to Canada' said the guard, and

she handed Dr. Hovaugh her clipboard” (237). The text thereby suggests that, despite Canada’s touted policy of multiculturalism, a person with black skin can expect to be treated as property in Canada.

By placing this female African American as an employee alongside the old Indigenous male/female inmates in the institution and under the administrative leadership of the white male Joe Hovaugh, King aligns and speaks for the rights of oppressed Indigenous, old people, workers, African Americans, and women alike.

In an article entitled “Sometimes It Works and Sometimes It Doesn’t”: Gender Blending and the Limits of Border Crossing in *Green Grass, Running Water* and *Truth & Bright Water*,” Suzanne Rintoul argues that King alludes to gender rights more broadly: “The four old Indians ... expose the instability of the gender boundaries as established in European and North American culture: they are women who transition almost seamlessly to male figures” (239). One might assume that King depicts the residents as simply switching identities from female to male, but the novel also reduces the distinct divide between maleness and femaleness, suggesting instead more flexibility in gender identity and generally championing LGBTQ rights. The novel’s depiction of Moby-Jane’s and Changing Woman’s rejection of Ahab’s tyranny in favour of a relationship with each other is evident as they swim away together (187).

Rintoul explains, however, that King’s discussion of gender is related specifically to Indigeneity and should be understood as being distinct from any general Western understanding of LGBTQ issues. She writes:

The importance of avoiding a universalizing or simplistic approach to thinking about First Nations gender identity cannot be overstated here, particularly since King reminds his readers repeatedly of the interrelatedness of race and gender. As each of the four old Indians assumes the identity of a white colonialist man to circumvent imprisonment, King aligns masculinity with European racism, and femininity with First Nations subordination. This process emphasizes the inadequacy of language that treats gender or race as discrete entities. (241)

I might add that, while the category of gender seems slippery in this text, most of King’s categorizations are elusive in regard to boundaries.

Rintoul continues by adding that “King’s four old Indians both trouble and reiterate European gender hierarchies,” but she also states that she does not by this position intend “to displace readings of the Indians as part of the trickster or ‘two-spirit’ traditions.” She summarizes the novel’s style by saying that, “in King’s fictional worlds, we cannot attach solitary meaning to any phenomenon” (241). As established above, when King writes about four old Indigenous men in a mental hospital under the care of Dr. Hovaugh, he is depicting the oppression of Indigenous people by white governments and Judeo-Christian culture,

and he is also depicting four old men in a care facility who may also be four old women. I would add that the novel is saying all of that while also suggesting that those four old people are multiply or flexibly gendered.

For flexibly gendered Indigenous and for non-Indigenous LGBTQ individuals, living in a late-life care facility may be a frightening prospect, and many might prefer to avoid walking through the door. Where individuals may be marginalized because of more than one factor, such as when they are both gay and Indigenous, negotiating the prejudice within institutions becomes even more challenging. If residency were to be unavoidable due to health and economic reasons, some might retreat back into the closet, which would mean that they then would be unable to receive visits from those people who were important to them but who might cause them to be outed again.

A US-based advocacy group called Services and Advocacy for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Elders (SAGE) states that “L.G.B.T. older people are twice as likely to be single, and 3 to 4 times as likely to have no children – and many are estranged from their biological families,” all of which results in greater need for external supports in late life (Services 1). In Canada, some LGBTQ-friendly late-life care homes are becoming available in major centres. In Toronto, for example, two non-profit (Drs. Paul and John Reka Centre and Wellesley Central Place) and three municipally funded care homes (Fudger House, Kipling Acres, True Davidson Acres) currently advertise themselves on the web as friendly to the LGBTQ community (Toronto Nursing Homes 1). However, LGBTQ-dedicated services are less available outside of major centres.

Many aged people of a variety of descriptions remain without a suitable support network to help them manage outside of an institution, and many are justly frightened at the prospect of admission to a culturally unacceptable facility.

In *Green Grass, Running Water*, King depicts four old people who for a variety of reasons walk away from a facility administered by white culture and government. Although this novel was written in 1993, the issues King portrays surrounding Indigeneity, gender identity, and aging continue to be of relevance today. King’s text invites readers to think about intentional and unintentional segregation of late-life care. Canada must encourage and facilitate the building of more homes and services directed to the specific needs of the marginalized. Kindness and good government require that care agents attempt to learn about all of the aspects of home that have been significant in a senior’s life and try to duplicate those qualities within the care facility or service. Until multiculturalism becomes more than just a written policy, care agents must attempt to provide everyone with an environment in which they can, at the very least, feel safe.

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