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God, Dog, and the Problem of the Immanent Frame

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God, Dog, and the Problem of the Immanent Frame

by

Sung-June Park

Under the Direction of Gina Marie Caison, PhD

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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ABSTRACT

In this project I rethink a key analytical category borrowed from religious studies—ritual—through the joint intervention of postsecular critique and Indigenous literature. My work unfolds in two parts: first in a critique of Eurocentric historicism and then in a move towards an anti-historicist interpretive horizon that nevertheless relates back to history. Chapter 2 then analyzes the Cherokee-Canadian author Thomas King’s 1993 novel, Green Grass, Running Water. I demonstrate that postsecular interpretation readily builds connections across time and space, prompting the reformation of categories such as ritual so that they may exceed their Eurocentric roots. What emerges from Green Grass, Running Water as a result is a clarified Indigenous radicalism that simultaneously reaffirms and displaces human agency.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my wife Ellen, my not yet born daughter, and my two most patient companions, Lucky and Coco. I owe so much and can pay back so little. I am, until the end of time, grateful.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Though syntax makes me list names in order, I do not mean to imply a rank in the guidance I’ve received from faculty at GSU. Dr. Gina Caison introduced me to the intersecting worlds of Indigenous Literatures, Southern Literature, and ecocriticism, and I would not be the aspiring scholar that I am today without her. Dr. Chris Kocela initiated me into graduate level studies and gave me the courage to pursue my interests (most importantly, postsecular discourse) with his kind words and support. Last but most definitely not least, Dr. Randy Malamud, with his always approachable pedagogy, led me to my aha moment as a graduate student, during which I realized that I may, after all, have a future in this thing called literary studies. Additional thanks to Drs. Schmidt, Rajiva, and Richardson for their encouragement and sage advice along the way. It’s been a unique and rewarding experience to commiserate over, but more importantly to think together about rupture in the world with my cohorts; I am obligated to single out Tyler Elrod for his exquisitely enacted voice memos, dank memes, and fresh takes which made my life at GSU a little too much fun at times. Thank you to all of those at GSU that illuminated my path forward—I am sure to look back on my time here as I strive to be a light for others.
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1 HIS-STORY OF RELIGION

Of all the signs typically affixed to the banner of modernity, “secular” might well be the most spectral. When approached genealogically, the circumstances of its purported emergence from Christian theology threatens self annulment.1 As a mode of historical narration, its developmental trope and its teleology have undergone systematic dismantlement by historians, sociologists, anthropologists, philosophers, and cultural critics alike.2 As a lexeme, its denotation has always remained in flux, having begun its etymological journey as saeculum, a temporal marker. The Latin word for a large tract of time acquired a contrastive note with the advent of Christendom as it came to stand in for this time, ordinary time, over against God’s eternity. Augustine’s notion of a higher form of life in the “City of God” that worked alongside ordinary life in this time added on layers of related contrasts until the temporal connotation of saeculum faded away and “secular,” as an adjective, came to encode worldly affairs, as opposed to spiritual life (Taylor, A Secular Age 264-5). Given the illusory status of the secular as a category, the question becomes whether scholars and critics should continue using it at all. For this reason, recent literary criticism has organized (post)secular lines of inquiry under new rubrics, for instance the global, as seen in a 2014 special issue of American Literature titled “After the Postsecular.”

In their introduction to “After the Postsecular” Peter Coviello and Jared Hickman contend that “Replacing secularity with globality as a background condition of modern life has the signal

1 It is not an exaggeration to say all historicizations of secular ideology, including the most widely discussed works in postsecular discourse such as Charles Taylor’s A Secular Age (2007) and Talal Asad’s Formations of the Secular (2003) build on Hegel’s history of Christianity.

virtue of introducing a master category that by definition theoretically makes all planetary inhabitants full subjects of history and also is considerably more neutral in relation to religion” (649). Attempts at moving beyond a “merely corrective” phase of methodological self-reflection towards a reinvention of first principles more often than not reveal the deep indebtedness of the self-same categories and theories that claim to liberate us. The big question becomes one of transcendence: can the process of creating meaning in this world overcome self-referential recursivity? This thesis proceeds with the conviction that any attempt at “moving beyond” first requires an examination of the conditions of possibility. The following pages will show that too much of supposedly postsecular scholarship ends up reanimating the very narrative that it tries to kill off. The death of God is dead, perhaps, but we would do well to remember that even Nietzsche’s original, ironic proclamation never envisioned itself as a finality, nor did it renounce sanctity or divinity tout court.

Coviello and Hickman’s conception of globality in relation to history and religion makes it incumbent upon critics to clarify whose history they speak for, and what they choose to understand as religion. If globality narrates a maturation out of a past provincialism, it destines itself to reiterate the Eurocentric assumptions underlying liberal multiculturalism. At its worst, such historiography enables what Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang call settler “moves to innocence” (“Decolonization is not a Metaphor” 1). In such a scenario, the very real history of secular progress proffering itself as justification for colonial subjugation gets conveniently forgotten. With respect to religion, globality must perform the well-nigh impossible task of describing the localized “fragilizations” of religion while respecting religion’s claim to ontology metaphysics. If secular ideology had a way of defining religion “by the bands of their opposition” (Derrida 43), globality carries the risk of dissolving religious singularity. To their
credit, Coviello and Hickman are clear-eyed in their characterization of globality as an *instantiation* of a postsecular frame, not without its complications. As always, the foundational paradox of correcting a thing that doesn’t quite exist (at least in the neat way that intellectual categories set it up to be) bedevils all endeavors of postsecular re-thinking.

Etymology makes time and history the originating problematic of the secular. The modern lexeme “religion” enjoys no such clarity, ergo performing the methodological quandary that it creates. Cicero traced the classical etymology of *religio*, which signified “conscientiousness, sense of right, moral obligation, duty” (Lewis, *Latin Dictionary*), to *relegere*, to re-trace or re-read (Cicero 193). On the other hand, the Roman grammarian Servius (and later, St. Augustine) preferred to reference *religare*, to re-bind or re-connect (Hoyt 126). To re-read or to re-connect: the word itself already encompasses semiotics in that nothing exists behind the shell of referentiality besides further interpretation. Simultaneously, the continuing process of socio-cultural re-binding constitutes a totalizing system, especially as *religio* pertains to ways of knowing and acting in the world. From the internalized paradox of *religio* sprang the secularizing arc of modernity (or so the story goes), which, in turn, engendered “religion” as it has been reread and reconnected today.

Hegel’s historical account of Christianity still remains the most powerful tool for secular apologetics and postsecular polemics alike for the way in which it theorizes Christianity’s collapse/expansion into paradox. Unsurprising for Hegel, his conceptualization of the secular points everywhere and nowhere; the secular structures what can be known and seen, and what stays out of reach. Together, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* and *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* lay out a developmental schematic in which Protestantism represents Christianity’s maximal realization (O’Regan 133). It is Protestant Christianity’s aim of achieving
“universal access to the particular qualities of freedom and knowledge” that allows Christian symbols such as the death of God and “Kenosis” (self-emptying) to fulfill their promise (O’Regan 133). Hegel effectively constructs a teleology of Christianity, for it is only in a thoroughly de-divinized modernity that Christianity can achieve its dream of universalization. In the present time, Slavoj Žižek follows Hegel’s conclusion with minimal emendment when he re-mythologizes the contradictions exposed on the cross as one of (i) God contesting himself, within himself and (ii) one in which a sovereign infinitude transcends into, not beyond, the finitude of this world (O’Regan 138). Stated differently, Christianity’s immanent transcendence (already an oxymoron) proceeds on the self-nullifying premise that only God can contradict God—a paradox that reinscribes foundational alterity into the figure of Jesus.

Cyril O’Regan gets to the crux of the matter when he summarizes Hegel’s secularizing logic as follows: “Precisely as the ideological warrant of the maximal realization of freedom and reason, Christianity is the foundation of the modern secular sphere” (134). The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor uses Hegel’s argument as a starting point for his own broad sweep of secular history. In his magnum opus A Secular Age (2007), he tracks all of the major lineaments of Enlightenment humanism in order to elucidate their contributions to Western secularity. Instead of fixating on precise definitions of the secular, Taylor focuses on the background conditions that made its historical emergence possible. He identifies two powerful secularizing forces in “disembedding” and “disenchantment,” which took the pre-modern “porous self” out of its social, spiritual, and physical enmeshments and hardened the boundaries of its individuality. The porous self’s dramatized maturation goes something like this:

Living a godly life in this world is something very different from living in the ordered Aristotelian Cosmos of Aquinas … It is no longer a matter of admiring a
normative order in which God has revealed himself through signs and symbols.

We rather have to inhabit it as agents of instrumental reason, working the system effectively in order to bring about God’s purposes … These are not just two different stances, but two incompatible ones. We have to abandon the attempt to read the cosmos as the locus of signs … Not just on the level of popular belief, as a world of spirits, do we have to disenchant the universe; we have also to … trade in a universe of ordered signs, in which everything has a meaning, for a silent but beneficent machine. (Taylor 99)

What finally closes the door on the old world of charms, spirits and fate is the emergence of something that Taylor calls the “immanent frame.” For the budding Enlightenment subject, the immanent frame decisively severs the last fraying threads tying divine beings to natural order. This move owed less to any new truths that had been discovered—though the developing knowledge discipline of science certainly played a role—and had far more to do with shifting social imaginaries. Thus, the sign of the Other begins to loom large in the historical emergence of the secular. One would think that Taylor’s fine-tuned historicism would begin to shift its focus, but strangely enough, his book never accomplishes that turn. Even when describing the historic explosion of spiritual options in the United States, he neglects to expound on the precise role of alterity in helping to produce the “nova effect.”

The anthropologist Saba Mahmood has put forth the most sustained critique of Taylor’s majoritarian tendencies in her scholarship on secular governance in Egypt. She stakes her intervention in all othered regions of the globe when she faults Taylor’s historicism for its complicity in “the operation of modern secular power” (Mahmood 294). Some scholars have questioned the necessity of all broad gestures, accusing postsecularism of “seeking to normalize
certain religious and social practices and forms of authority and social imagination as representative of ‘the people’” (Mufti 18). Far-reaching critiques have their time and place, especially when dealing with the base formations of modernity in the North Atlantic. However, if (as Taylor and others claim) secularism and secularity do indeed behave differently in North America, it behooves critics to attune themselves to the othered voices that have had a foundational relationship with the dominant political imaginaries of the land.

The “discovery” of the “New World” by the monarchies of Europe marked a profound rupture in the known world for Christian theologians. The Standing Rock Sioux scholar and activist Vine Deloria Jr. points to a 1493 Inter Caetera bull by Pope Alexander VI as an early indicator of Christianity’s ambitions for the “newly discovered” land and its people. In granting “to you and your heirs and successors, kings of Castile and Leon, all singular the aforesaid countries and islands,” the Pope assured God’s pleasure in seeing “that in our times especially the Catholic faith and the Christian religion be exalted […] that the health of souls be cared for and that barbarous nations be overthrown and brought to the faith itself” (qtd. in Deloria, God is Red 258). The oxymoron of proprietary theft, the paternal pretense of stewardship, and the violence of conquest: the three mainstays of ecumenical “care” would remain constant long after missionary logic reorganized itself into the ideology of empire, laying bare the close interconnections between colonialism and the politics of liberal secularism. As Deloria states in his widely discussed polemic God is Red (1973), “Western religion seems to have resolved this problem of interpretation by secularizing itself. Instead of working toward the Kingdom of God on Earth, history becomes the story of a particular race fulfilling its manifest destiny” (68). Furthering Deloria’s insight, the Anishinaabe writer and critic Gerald Vizenor uncovers the role of literary culture in authorizing colonial theft, absent the political authority of the Church. The
institutionalized role of colonialist literature, which Vizenor refers to in the title of his monograph, *Manifest Manners* (1994), is captured in Wallace Stegner’s declaration that “No place, not even a wild place, is a place until it has had that human attention that in its highest reach we call poetry” (qtd. in Vizenor 10). No different from colonial dispossession, literary discovery of place inscribes the absence of tribal remembrance.

That the old insights of Indigenous experience might strike postsecular discourse as new(s) only underscores the immense difficulty of reforming the church of secularism from the inside. Indeed, the only effective way to appraise the edifice of the secular may be from the outside. Thirty-four years before Taylor’s history of the secular, Deloria had already argued rigorously for an anti-historicist understanding of Indigenous religion. The history of religion (especially its triumphalist variant) is one in which religion becomes “an evolutionary process in which mankind progresses from primitive superstitions to logically perfected codes of conduct, from a multiplicity of deities to a monotheistic religion with well-developed institutions and creeds honed to philosophical purity of expression” (Deloria, *God is Red* 64). The idea that institutions and creeds conspire to propagate a “purified” monotheism receives further attention from Vizenor. In his discussion of “terminal creeds,” Vizenor sheds light on symbolic structures that reproduce themselves as unchanging narrative/representative truths. Amidst the ruins of postmodern simulations, narratives about the “disappearing Indian,” the “natural Indian,” or the “primitive, superstitious Indian” (among others) take on institutional solidity as they endlessly copy and re-copy dominant definitions of “Indian.” Terminal creeds all share the same formal features in their humorless, monologic fixity.

For both Vizenor and Deloria, the answer to dominant narratives comes through the land—a locus of spiritual and symbolic power for Indigenous tribes. The land possesses sacred
“power” that attains intelligibility through Indigenous knowledges, experiences and memories. “Sacred places are the foundation of all other beliefs and practices because they represent the presence of the sacred in [Indigenous] lives” (Deloria, *God is Red* 285). Because no human structure can contain the sacred, the idea of sacred land in particular poses a fundamental threat to the authority of the secular nation state. The United States’ history of violently suppressing tribal ceremonies and rituals (graphically displayed by the events of the Wounded Knee Massacre) directly relates to the country’s colonial desire for Indigenous land. Ongoing efforts by federal courts to circumscribe Indigenous religious practices according to geographic boundaries, historical records, and a liberal rights regime merely represent the latest iteration of a long historical process.

On August 11, 1978, President Carter signed the American Indian Religious Freedom Act into law. The act represented the U.S. government’s effort to correct for a history of government-sponsored religious persecution and cultural genocide. Reading the text of the law, one recognizes how legal formalism makes correcting *for* history and correcting history coterminous businesses in the liberal nation state. “Whereas the freedom of religion for all people is an inherent right,” begins Public Law 95-341, after which it states, “Whereas the United States has traditionally rejected the concept of a government denying individuals the right to practice their religion and, as a result, has benefited from a rich variety of religious heritages in this country” (United States Congress Section 1996). Formally speaking, “whereas” clauses structure the logic that compels the operative provisions of a contract or statute. In critical legal studies, legal formalism has been “summed up as proffering the possibility of an ‘immanent moral rationality’” (Weinrib 954), whereby the “immanent operation of legal rationality, characterizes
law’s distinctiveness affirmatively through the claim that the content of law is elaborated from within” (954). Yet the opening clauses of PL 95-341 show how immanent law retroactively authorizes itself in its declaration of transcendent truths. The initiating term “Whereas” ritualistically summons citizen subjects into a heightened social plane from within which the state proclaims the stability and ontic authority of its rights regime.

The opening act of self-authorization sets the stage for a subsequent set of self-absolutions: “Whereas such religious infringements result from the lack of knowledge […]” (United States Congress Section 1996). The great irony is that in its stated effort to “protect and preserve for American Indians their inherent right of freedom to […] traditional religions” (United States Congress Section 1996), the statute interpellates the “Indian” into its own civil religion. The formalism of the law takes on a ritualistic cast; a formal recitation of transcendent principles precedes ritualized purifications of the state’s past pollutions, which get framed as honest mistakes made in the name of nature conservation. To historically dispossessed and persecuted Indigenous nations, the hollowness of the opening invocations of PL 95-341 lays bare the semantic vacuum at the core of ritual, at least in the way that ritual operates as a Western technology of power. As Maurice Bloch argues, it isn’t so much its content as its formalized expression that matters (“Symbols” 55-6). Ritual, in other words, defines itself by the constraints it places on syntax.

As it happens, PL 95-341 perfectly embodies the anthropologist Talal Asad’s critique of ritual as an analytic category. In Genealogies of Religion (1993), he argues that “ritual” remains irreparably shot through with modern Western assumptions about the individual and the state.
The hegemonic function of the term renders it another historically shaped organization of power that obscures the diversity and incommensurability amongst historical manifestations of so-called ritual activities (Asad 55-79). Asad’s criticism easily extends to religion itself, and we need only interrogate the manner in which PL 95-341 constitutes Native American religion to discover the central question that motivates Asad’s widely discussed monograph, *Formations of the Secular*. “What is the connection,” Asad asks, “between ‘the secular’ as an epistemological category and ‘secularism’ as a political doctrine?” (1). In making religion epistemologically manageable, “secular ideology” narrows down religion’s purview to the domain of private “belief.” The privatization of belief serves to seal off a naturalized comprehension of socially saturated, organizable space from any and all intrusions by the supernatural. This division, in turn, empowers “secularism” as the arbiter of “this-worldliness” predicated upon the real-rational. As seen in PL 95-341, the demarcation of this-worldliness from other-worldliness has the ironic effect of conjuring a transcendent “political metaphysic,” in which the consolidation of the rational, self-possessed, rights bearing citizen relocates faith and belief to the domain of imaginary-irrational-private.

Manichaeism can engender only a coercive and exclusionary logic of enforcement that belies the tolerant facade of the liberal, secular state. Hence, PL 95-341 subordinates Native American religions to the citizen’s right to freedom from its very title. The irreducible diversity of Native American customs, traditions, ceremonies and rituals can only find expression through a negative articulation of material rights. In both *God is Red* and *Red Earth, White Lies* (1995), Deloria explains how even those limited articulations of religious rights were subsequently eroded by a federal judiciary that didn’t hesitate to contradict both precedent and logic to overturn tribal protections. Two Supreme Court rulings from 1988 and 1990 are noteworthy for

Taking such history into consideration, postsecular interpretation can proceed along two tracks in the study of literature: the first takes place in the wake of poststructuralism and asserts an enduring spirituality and religiosity in the meaning making process (Branch, “Rituals”; Schwartz, “Poetics”; Finkelstein, “Mount Vision”). The second confronts a disciplinary past and present overdetermined by a triumphalist narrative of secular progress (Kaufmann, “The Religious”; Pecora, “Secularization”). On a fundamental level, both tracks respond to a “modern Anglo-American Literary Academy” that continues to re-inscribe Matthew Arnold’s age old prophecy, that the demise of religious authority will inaugurate literature as a de-divinized vehicle for the “core values of religion” (Finkelstein 14). To the extent that the writing of history is a form of poiesis, and all meaning making unfolds in time and history, both tracks can be said to contain each other; it would be misleading to claim that postsecular discourse maintains neat divisions. Where disagreements do break out, religious representation often informs the main points of contention. Tracy Fessenden reminds critics of Asad’s polemics (though she never names him) when she accuses postsecular literary criticism of invoking a “spiritual” present that answers to beliefs entirely lacking in content. Fessenden trains her critical eye on Thomas McLure’s book *Partial Faiths*, which in her view, merely reaffirms the Arnoldian replacement story for literature. A look at McLure’s chapter on Native American literature confirms Fessenden’s criticism. Overly confident in his argument that a breakdown of spiritual
intelligibility fragments modern religious belief into “partial faiths,” he glosses writers from disparate tribes and traditions. Consequently, McClure treats Native American literature as an unproblematic, bounded category that readily melts into a postmodern “spiritual” landscape.

Stepping outside of literary criticism for a moment, one notices that the sharpest historical critiques of postsecular methodology tend to come from social scientists operating in postcolonial circles. Though Mahmood aims at Taylor, she might as well be addressing McClure when she accuses Taylor’s historicism of eliding the story of how modernity took shape in the context of “Christianity’s encounters with its ‘others’” (Mahmood, “Other-Wise” 285). On an oppositional note, Lori Branch urges postsecular literary scholarship to fulfill a “religious turn” that continental philosophy from Wittgenstein onwards have moved towards but never managed to complete. In “The Rituals of Our Re-Secularization” she argues that a factually oriented fixation on the representational mechanics of class, race, gender, empire and so forth, ultimately buttresses a materialist status quo in the academy. Her counsel to postcolonial literary critics is that they impoverish their own politics by shying away from positivizing the negative theological dimensions of literary theory (Branch, “Rituals” 26-9).

From a higher altitude, controversies over postsecular methodologies appear somewhat circular, for the tension between historicism and linguistics replicates the etymological divergence between saeculum as a matter of time and religio as a question of meaning making. Some crucial disambiguations become necessary at this juncture. First, it must be made clear that a religiously shaped entity, event, category, or idea need not maintain any direct correspondence with religion proper. This means, for instance, that redemptive outlooks in secular theory can be articulated without reference to divine intervention or theological formulations of good and evil. The same goes for religion as it has been purportedly produced by secularism. What we want to
avoid is a fallacy of origins that, couched as history, becomes a form of determinism: because secularism was Christian in origin (and *vice versa*), it is bound to remain that way. A semiotic parallel to this principle prevents the religious and the secular from being referentially locked into each other. Second, we must resist the temptation to essentialize the religious and the secular as stable, necessarily opposed signs. Asad himself says as much in *Formations of the Secular* despite the decisively anti-secular cast of his anti-statist rhetoric. Non-essentialism obliges us to view both secularism and religion as malleable formations, changing in response to various social, political, and environmental pressures. Hence, Asad cautions against “hasty pronouncements about the virtues or vices of secularism” (17)—a directive that opens the way for his tentative vision of a negotiated minoritarian democracy that “secular Europe could become” (180).

The third and final point of clarification, one that will require the remainder of this thesis to narrate, reveals that unlike the religious and the secular, which at any given point represent the contingent cohesion of various sensibilities, attitudes, embodiments and ways of being, *transcendence* and *immanence* are referentially interdependent. As theological terms, as literary tropes, and as embodied experiences, transcendence and immanence bear immense symbolic weight in both religious and secular spheres. This thesis identifies an urgent need for rethinking the traditional dichotomy between religion-transcendence and secular-immanence: a move that complicates the political horizon of postsecular criticism.

If “a reconfigured history of the profession” of literary studies takes, as per Michael Kaufmann, “the dynamic and recursive relationship between the secular and the religious as an *object* of inquiry rather than the stable *grounds* upon which that inquiry is based” (615), then
postsecular criticism must necessarily maintain a synchronous commitment to historically informed ideology critique and (reformed) formalism. Separating the two risks reifying the divide between secularism as a consolidation of this-worldly space-time and religion as privatized, creative enterprise of interpretation and belief. Generative futurities can only spring from historical consciousness inasmuch as all acts of meaning making partake in the past contexts that bring them into being. Yet Kaufmann’s call remains easier to issue than to answer, precisely because of way in which anti-foundationalist thought destabilizes all foundations. In this sense, the “post” in postsecular modifies something that doesn’t exist or act in the world in the way that any single historic account imagines it to, but nevertheless “governs our attempts to describe that world” (Coviello and Hickman 651)

So theory has a way of circling back to the foundational problem of reference and logic. What seem like inconsistencies in Asad’s line of critique—his reductive judgment of secularism when “the secular is neither singular nor stable” (25), his materialist rendering of religion as it is lived, sensed, and embodied (which reproduces the kind of explanatory naturalization and socialization that he deems secularist)—in fact illuminate a dilemma of self-reference at the core of Western epistemology. At issue is how thought composes thematics, and what thinking must become to overcome them. Anthropology has previously confronted the problem in terms of a debate over “rationality” versus “relativism.” Rational explanation of other societies and cultures was said to reductively master their values and categories for present cognitive purposes. Counterarguments stated that rational analysis itself always shifted according to its limited parameters and that its heuristics need not entail judgements on the objects being analyzed. Across disciplinary boundaries, the modal disjuncture between the act of analyzing and the object of analysis spawned related controversies over the “knowing subject and observed object,
abstraction and the concrete world, theory and lived experience, [and] the universal and the local” (McLennan, “Postsecular Turn” 16).

In consequence, critics such as Gregor McLennan question the specifically postcolonial, postsecular force of scholarship that uncover the violence dealt by rational, scientific, or secular representations of the religious. McLennan’s skepticism, while perspicacious, forgets the forward face of theory. Attempts to transcend the paradox of self-reference, whether they subscribe to secular, intra secular, or postsecular outlooks, cannot help but profess an ineradicable religiousness. Žižek sums up the challenge in Lacanian terms when he states that self-referential “gentrifications” of the “‘presymbolic Real’ only generate, as a precipitate or ‘remainder’ of the process, the very ‘outside’ of the Real […] they attempt to master” (Wolfe, “posthumanism” xx). Stated differently, self-exceeding (and perhaps all of meaning-making) necessarily involves a leap of faith from the infinitude of what could become to the fathomability of what ever so fleetingly is. The lingering presence of the other-wise compels belief at the core of all systems, a condition of the mind that makes “it […] impossible not to believe in God” (qtd. in Benson). That, from no less a pen than Lacan’s.

With respect to all the major issues that postsecularism has begun to track, Indigenous Studies can claim to have always-already been there. From its foundation, the United States has preached an institutionalized secularism, which, as a negative right, found expression as the citizen’s right to “free exercise.” Tisa Wenger notes that for Native Americans, religious freedom has long been an elusive and problematic goal, not least because missionary establishments wielded undue influence over the policies of the Bureau of Indian Affairs up until the 1920s. In We Have a Religion, Wenger focuses on the role that the Pueblo dance
controversies played in the demise of the missionary establishment at the BIA. Against all odds, the Pueblo had preserved and protected its dance tradition since Spanish arrival. As a ritual practice, dances served a number of social functions, including the marking of seasons. Pueblo Traditionalists seeking first amendment protections had thought that legal protection would protect the dance from the kind of historical hostilities that the tribe was familiar with. What First Amendment protection brought instead was a host of unprecedented challenges from within and without.

If only Deloria could’ve traveled back in time to offer the Pueblo traditionalists the insight that “The First Amendment was [only] designed to keep Christians from killing each other” (Red Earth, White Lies 30). The amendment had not been designed with “a handful of old Indians […] saying prayers in the California High Country” or “another handful […] ingesting some peyote buttons in a remote setting in Oregon” in mind, and it is precisely the First Amendment that the future Supreme Court will lean on to absolve the United States of the responsibility of respecting tribal sacred space/practice, lest the government “favors” any one religion (Red Earth, White Lies 30). Following legal recognition, Pueblo Tribal leaders found themselves struggling to isolate the parts of their culture deemed “religious” from all other spheres of life, including politics and economics. Redefining their dance as “religion” stripped tribal leaders of their authority to enforce communal participation, for what had always been treated like a kind of community work was now reconfigured as a matter of individual conscience. Public controversy attracted uninformed outside intervention as well. Moralizing missionaries confronted reformers whose understandings of the dance were no less fantastic (Wenger 136). The actual dance itself turned out to be of secondary concern. “Left in the lurch by a society that crave[d] participation in their ceremonials” but couldn’t respect their religion
for what it was (Deloria, Red Earth, White Lies 30), Pueblo traditionalists quickly became privy to the way in which the secular state recognized religions based on their formal proximities to the one “legitimate” religion, Christianity. A plethora of early American texts demonstrate that America’s secular self image emerged in direct reaction to Puritan anxieties over Indigenous “encroachment.” Indigenous “magic” and its close cousin, “witchcraft,” provided a negative canvas on which colonial America articulated its supreme rationality and its natural right to an “Indian wilderness.” Wenger reveals only the tip of the iceberg when she states that Indigenous religious freedom “continue[s] to challenge the limits of dominant notions about what counts as ‘religion’ in American public discourse” (xiv).

Within the modern day North American academy, the avowedly secular thrust of theory has placed Indigenous studies in an awkward spot. As Craig Womack notes in Red on Red (1999), Indigenous scholars never fully bought into the dogmas of deconstruction, for they knew certain essentialisms to be crucial to their lived experiences and their self-understandings (4). The postmodern decree that there can be no such thing as an uncompromised “native perspective” had always seemed dangerously complicit with the homogenizing aim of assimilationist ideology. The legitimization of Native American literary separatism, then, rests on the fraught project of asserting an Indigenous “critical center” amid a theoretical landscape that adamantly denies the existence of any centers. Womack outlines two prerequisites for

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3 The Salem Witch Trials famously resulted in widespread mistrust of religious “fanaticism,” which in turn solidified the future U.S. government’s self-understanding as a secular institution. For an account of how political, proprietary, and border instability contributed to the events of the witch trials, see Emerson W. Baker’s A Storm of Witchcraft. “Indian wilderness” is a phrase that comes from one of hundreds of publications produced by Cotton Mather, an influential New England clergyman. His history narrative, Magnalia Christi Americana, sheds light on how thinkers of the time summoned Indigenous customs and practices to define colonial social space.

4 For Deloria, the Western “contempt” for Indigenous religions stems from the temporal concepts and doctrines of Christianity (God is Red 74), which restricts God to “a particular mode of operation and sequence of appearance” (266). Such a mode of narration, when formalized as history, leads to the naturalization of a “traditional American identity” predicated on progress (73).
separatist criticism, the first of which calls on scholars of Native literatures to rethink the binary between authentic (traditional) orality and contaminated (modern) literacy. Second is the need to recognize the inherent politics of Indigenous literatures as manifested in their mimetic function. “Native artistry is not pure aesthetics, or art for art’s sake,” argues Womack, “as often as not Indian writers are trying to invoke as much as evoke. The idea behind ceremonial chant is that language, spoken in the appropriate ritual contexts, will actually cause a change in the physical universe” (16-17). In this light, a self-reflective postsecular approach to Indigenous literatures perforce allies itself with the fight for literary and political separatism. The interpretive paucity (and predictability) of critical frames such as “magical” realism, “fantasy,” and “mythology,” into which Indigenous stories frequently get cast, speak to the urgent need to revisit the secularist assumptions of regnant methodologies.

Furnishing a cohesive interpretive frame that respects Indigenous singularity without sliding into bad faith metaphysics and exclusionary logic, however, is easier said than done. To address this dilemma, the historian Dipesh Chakrabarty offers a useful anti-historicist vision. Wishing for the obsolescence of his own discipline, he argues that a new analytic of so-called “religion” located outside of the boundaries of Europe needs to think beyond history. History and historicism, in his conception, reduces events, agencies, and societies all different from each other to an empty, homogeneous common measure that all too easily ossifies into a “natural” mode of existence (23). Naturalized history always betrays a historicism that seeks to discipline and colonize, given the disturbing genealogy of the science of nature and the natural.\(^5\) Hence Chakrabarty argues that “the ‘naturalization’ of history and its ontology should be resisted, partly because they entail a teleological political imperialism in which the past is necessarily tied to a

\(^5\) During the Enlightenment, distinguishing between the natural and unnatural became the privileged way of classifying racial and sexual identity (Morton 16).
modern/modernist present and future, whose privileged origin and source of dissemination is the West” (McLennan 14). Escaping the developmental-modernist tropes of historicism requires receptivity to radically different ontologies, of which the observer must suspend any judgments on validity. This analytical standard expands into three important methodological principles when it comes to writing and thinking about religion. First, supernatural entities must necessarily be treated as active agents in the lives and practices of non-European religious cultures. Second, cultural “translation” must arise from a new politics that does not pass cultural phenomena, belief and experience “through some neutral superior set of terms designed, in fact, to establish the subordination of these phenomena to alien (secular) norms” (McLennan 15). Third, and perhaps most important, disjunctive temporalities must be preserved through the utilization of separate genealogies.

Even with such a schema in hand, analyzing “pre-modern” or “non-modern” religious phenomena proves exceedingly difficult. Taylor shows just why in a section in his book that narrates the secular subject’s inability to comprehend religious alterity. Tellingly, he turns to the imaginative realm of literature to illustrate the experience of living within the immanent frame.

What makes Othello a tragedy, and not just a tale of misfortune, is that we hold its protagonist culpable in his too-ready belief of the evidence fabricated by Iago. He had an alternative mode of access to her innocence in Desdemona herself, if he could only have opened his heart/mind to her love and devotion. The fatal flaw in the tragic hero Othello is his inability to do this, imprisoned as he is in a powerful code of honour. (Taylor 568)

What’s interesting about this passage isn’t what Taylor argues, but what gets unconsciously reproduced by his analogy. Having been universalized into a metaphor for all secular
subjectivities, Othello loses that most important defining trait of his—his alterity. Meanwhile, the sign of Desdemona animates a cultural trope that so often surfaces in polemics against the religious practices of the Other, the feminine seducer. Early modern witchcraft narratives and treatises, for example, are replete with descriptions of witches as seductive temptresses.6 Likewise, feminized Indigeneity surfaces as a stock trope in colonial American texts, seducing the upright frontiersman to compromise his morals and “go native.”7 What Taylor’s passage nakedly demonstrates is the way in which historical writing already invests power into its form. The “significance of [unrealized] discoveries and the melancholy of dominance” that Vizenor identifies as tropes of dominant “simulations” remains untouched and unbothered in Taylor’s story of the secular subject (11). The result is that the differential features of Othello and Desdemona get pressed into a totality of pasts undergone. Even the most astute critic of the secular cannot prevent description from slipping into prescription.

The main problem, as secularist skeptics might put it, is that “by all the criteria of comprehension available to us,” Other people (their experiences of and relationships with the Other-world notwithstanding) “are not living in a different time and a different world” (McLennan 15). According to them, critics living in this-world must, one way or another, come to terms with “the utter historicity of things — ourselves as ‘dying organisms’, our societies and ideas, indeed nature itself, and even nature’s laws” (McLennan 15). This thesis does not pretend to adjudicate this dispute. Instead, it focuses on the storied nature of both sides of the debate. At the end of the day, the contest between the secular and the postsecular boils down into a contest between stories. “The truth about stories is that that’s all we are,” says the Cherokee-Canadian

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6 Cotton Mather’s witchcraft narratives are a wonderful example, though plenty of witchcraft pamphlets published in Europe exhibit the same cultural habits.
7 See Ronald Takaki, “The Tempest in the Wilderness: The Racialization of Savagery” for a succinct overview.
author and critic Thomas King (The Truth About Stories 12). The moral death-of-god story has strong structural backers in science and western epistemology. All three like to present their arguments as discoveries that come to “us” when “we” let go of our irrational, servile, blinkered view of the world. All accounts surreptitiously consolidate modern liberal identity within a natural order of things. Facing the institutional narratives of the secular stands the Other, who understands that “immanent” western modernity derives its power from its own “transcendent” visions of the good: empirical scientific knowledge, individualism, negative freedom, and rationality. In the name of the good, so much can be tolerated, even spirituality and religion. “we understand that we clear cut forests not to enrich the lives of animals but to make profit. We know that we dam(n) rivers not to improve water quality but to create electricity and to protect private property” (King, The Truth About Stories 27). It is at this juncture that literature and literary studies is asked to respond. Doubtless, neither can afford not stay mute.

So this thesis prepares to stage an intervention. I admit that no matter the explanatory reach of any analytic apparatus, there will always be experiences, especially those pertaining to other-worldly contact, that remain too out there, too Other, to be analyzed or even comprehended in a meaningful way. Instead of repressing or ignoring such a reality, I lean into it. Thomas King’s 1993 novel Green Grass, Running Water offers the perfect platform—if one could call it that—for thinking about the always incomplete, and therefore always productive, past, present and future of postsecular critique. And now, without further ado, the water.
2 SLIPPERY WHEN WET OR ICY OR GASEOUS

“But there is water everywhere” (King, Green Grass 469). The observing subject coolly contemplates its own aquatic constitution and expresses it as a fraction: two-thirds. This much is known, meaning this much is measured and contained and bottled and sold. Secular knowing, that most essential human labor that justifies intellectual property in the act of creating it, cunningly forgets the priority relations that birthed it. In the beginning there was the knowledge of the self, independent of external reality. Then came the knowledge of observable reality as neutral fact. Neutral facts annealed into natural order, and only then did modern, god-less subjects, make cautious theoretical references to transcendence. In this way holy water became the universal solvent. But the problem, as “I” puts it to Coyote, is that “There are no truths…Only stories” (King, Green Grass 391)—stories we live and think and die by. “Be careful with the stories you tell” cautions the author as essayist, as another “I” (The Truth about Stories 10), “And you have to watch out for the stories that you are told” (10). The most fraught of all stories may very well be the story of “we.” The exclusionary syntax of knowing all too easily transmogrifies into racial metaphysics, so whatever stories “we” tell ourselves now cannot afford the naïve transcendent signification of a “we,” and neither can it assume the immanent self-sufficiency of the Enlightenment “I.” Descartes “famous dictum notwithstanding, the more one thinks, the more the separation of the “I” from a “we” seems arbitrary, so a good story always circles back to the “zero point” of storytelling, the relationality of I-We. And here’s how that happens, says this chapter, in the mind of one very slippery “I”.

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8 And to be fair to the Western intellectual tradition, thinkers like Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty have said as much.
2.1 “So.”

Thomas King’s novel *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993) willingly takes on the risk of summoning many a “we” as it narrates a multiplicity of worlds running through the hard borders of secular ontology. The preceding chapter demonstrated the descriptive breadth of postsecularism as a mode of historical narration, and also shed light on the limits of such narratives, for they prove lacking as a tool of understanding lived experience. The fossilizing gaze of historicism limits its modus operandi to one of excavation. Events occurring outside of “this-worldly” time and the experiences of those whose lived worlds are the first world will not yield to the sequential uncovering of historical analysis. Postsecularism as an interpretive heuristic requires more than just the story of how “this-world” came to be in time—it requires insight into the individual’s experience of and beyond that world. What’s being asked for here isn’t simple disciplinary addition, for cobbling together the historicized consciousness of a social “we” with the interiority of the individual “I” merely reinscribes Asad’s description of secularism’s political metaphysic. Yet for as long as the “I” finds intelligibility through the linguistic, epistemological, and cultural commons inerded within a “we,” thinking through their distinction will lead to entanglements of increasing complexity. As a story about stories, *Green Grass* begins and ends with this conundrum. Interpenetrating tall tales intervene in a story line of “this-world,” recursively and reflexively exposing their own storiedness by coming back to the scene of their own staging. More than just being a text about the postsecular, *Green Grass*

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9 The usage of the word “world” in this chapter is deliberately imprecise so that the term can straddle the secularist, material world and any number of other inhabited worlds. This chapter will frequently summon secular humanist dichotomies between this-world and the other-world, the natural and the supernatural. It must be emphasized that the usage of those terms does not imply endorsement, but rather represents an attempt to explicate out from a secularist starting point, which, as any intellectually honest postsecular critic will admit, is wholly inevitable and necessary. To specify further, this-world, in the context of *Green Grass*, encompasses the direct spatial correspondences that occur between *Green Grass* and the “real world” outside the text, which index the penetration of modern secularity in its various (epistemological, cultural, political, ideological, etc.) guises.
embodies and performs postsecular critique; this chapter clarifies the terms of the novel’s mercurial I-We embodiments and in doing so, attempts to summon a postsecular interpretive horizon wherein Indigenous “supernatural” storytelling performs (and thereby powers) its way through and beyond both naturalized history and historicized nature.

“So. In the beginning, there was nothing, Just the water” (1). The opening line of Green Grass frames the framing narrative of the novel, by way of introducing the entity that predates all existence—water. The linguist and the semiotician will no doubt notice that the word “water” actually occurs at the very end of its signifying chain, which technically isn't even the first sentence; the conjunction “so” stands alone, before all else, seemingly transcendent in its narrative effect of flipping the switch. At the same time, there exists a congruence between grammatical function (where a conjunction relates one syntactic unit to another) and pragmatic implication (where a discourse marker, broadly conceived, relates a speaker to a listener) that concentrates a great degree of immanent power within “so.” So what came first, water or discourse? The ensuing sentence muddles the question further with the temporally ambiguous insertion of Coyote: “Coyote was there, but Coyote was asleep” (1). The question of who came first, it appears, doesn’t really matter in this space. The narrator, at the end of the same paragraph, reveals their embodiment in an “I,” but offers nothing else in the way of personification. However one chooses to think of the “I,” whether as a Lacanian “I” or as an embodied isolate or simply as a first person narrator, a few things remain incontrovertible, that the “I” instigates storytelling, that as far as the storytelling performative is concerned, “I” comes into existence at the same time as water and Coyote, and that “I” exists in a “privileged,” originary relationship with the two.
In oral communication, “so” prefaces “sequence-initiating actions and…indicate the status of the upcoming action as 'emerging from incipiency 'rather than being contingent on the immediately preceding talk” (Bolden 974). Because its rhetorical function presumes a speaker and an audience, the utterance of “so” by definition gives birth to Coyote and “their” (it must be noted the novel never refers to Coyote with a pronoun, gendered or otherwise) interlocutor “I.” What’s more, “I” already seems poised to split up into another “we,” as implied through verb conjugation. The use of the third-person singular verb ending in “I says” is something that “I” maintains throughout the entirety of the novel; the fact that “I” does not conjugate similar verbs in the same manner, as seen in “I tell Coyote. ‘Sit down[…]’” (113), suggests that the idiolectic expression isn’t entirely innocent. The verb “say,” perhaps more so than “tell” and surely more so than ‘speak,’ ‘declare’ or ‘respond,’ calls attention to the provisionality and contingency of transitory speech acts. By implying a third person subject in “I says,” “I” walks a fine line between the orality of a narrator/storyteller and the textuality of a character/reader. Like a recursive function always poised to branch off into more discourse formations, the storytelling “I” entails an infinitude of possible “we” configurations.

One can picture “I” and Coyote floating, undifferentiated, in the ocean of the presymbolic real, but doing so would disintegrate all discourse. Astrida Neimanis offers a compelling alternative vision in Bodies of Water (2017), in which “water […] is facilitative and directed towards the becoming of other bodies. Our own embodiment […] is never really autonomous. Nor is it autochthonous, nor autopoietic” (3). “Really” bears surprisingly heavy weight as a qualifier, and in her work Neimanis leans on the sometimes porous border between really and kind of in order to conceptualize and thematize, a strategic maneuver that is familiar to readers of posthumanist theory. Neimanis’ thematization of “posthuman gestationality” makes room for
bodies that are of each other and not each other. This thesis borrows Neimanis’ figuration of gestationality and magnifies its aporetic core. Posthumanist figurations afford space for ambiguity, uncertainty, and the unknown, a feature of obvious importance in dealing with “other-worldly” matters. Without the capacity to factor in temporal ambiguity, gestational logic would devolve into a recitation of who begot whom, which, in “I” and Coyote’s watery world, makes very little sense.

Fittingly, the one event in the framing narrative of *Green Grass* that proceeds according to a derivative logic produces “G O D,” the progenitor of all Western preoccupations with origins. Coyote has a dream that right away demonstrates its embodiment with all the noise it makes. In two consecutive encounters, Coyote Dream comes to recognize itself through differentiation. First, it sees the water, in which it perceives a reflection of its own eyes. “Those Dream Eyes” speak back to confirm that what the dream sees is in fact water (1). If the Dream Eyes went on to create further stories, filling out their own fractal pattern of discursive self-recognition, that branch of stories is lost. Coyote Dream recognizes that it has no control over the water; having had its dream of commanding the world shattered, it wakes up Coyote with its many sad noises. Seeing that it shares a self-recognizing intelligence with Coyote (“I am very smart” emphasis added, 2), the dream confuses itself for Coyote, until Coyote sets it straight by naming it “dog” (2). As a signifier, “dog” manifests the novel’s first tentative expression of hierarchy, for it refers to a lesser version of Coyote. The cultural presuppositions that place the domesticated dog under the wild Coyote in the hierarchy of beings is, in turn, a product of romanticism, which imagined untamed, original nature as a repository for authenticity (Morton 29-78). Perhaps Coyote thought of this symbolic history when they named the dream “dog.” Perhaps Coyote simply meant to effect differentiation through commonality: *Canis Lupus*
*Familiaris* and *Canis Latrans* sprang forth from the same genus, after all. Though Coyote leaves the interpretation of their nomenclature open ended (their exasperation with dog by no means entails discipline or hierarchical order), it is clear what dog thinks about its new name. Thinking is what does him in: “when that Coyote Dream thinks about being a dog, it gets everything mixed up” (2). The *cogito* that declares “I am” cannot handle the self-alienation brought on by its autopoietic logic. “I’m in charge of the world” takes for granted that I’m in charge of myself, and in effort to assert the latter, dog’s *thinking* inverts dog’s name to god. “I don’t want to be a little god […] I want to be a big god!” cries god (3), willing itself into larger stature, a change that gets inscribed into the latest iteration of what is now unmistakably *his* name, “G O D” (3). His command over textual authority thus consolidated, Judeo-Christian G O D turns his attention back to the water, and so begins all the troubles of this-world.

Evidently, events in the other-world of *Green Grass* have a way of fundamentally disrupting categorical in-grouping and out-grouping. The discrete individualism of an I might bubble up to make discourse legible, but who *belongs* to whom is not a question that needs asking when “I,” Coyote, Coyote Dream, and water all exist outside of time, and together as a single performative-interpretive unit bring the totality of storied worlds into being with the discourse marker “So.” Thus arises a need to distinguish what goes on in the ideal form of storytelling, an I-We “relationality” or “gestationality” that resists conceptualization in this-world. This-worldly, secular discourse assumes a Me-You relational structure between autonomous Enlightenment subjects. What this chapter will refer to as the storytelling “expanse” theorizes a place that contains the storytelling performative-interpretive. Broader, less fixed, and more multivalent than a narrative plane, it factors in interpretive/performative self-consciousness as well as a bidirectional liminality between I and We. When the I-We storytelling expanse
intersects with the Me-You narrative plane, borders get crossed, meanings get destabilized, linear time gets scrambled, and what was blocked resumes to flow. And yet. The I-We expanse never presumes independence from, or higher/holier status over, the Me-You plane, for what other than the ordering principles of syntax, the this-worldly significations of lexemes, the pragmatics of discourse, and the history of the English language enables the legibility of the other-world of Green Grass in this-world? Not that there are any hard and fast boundaries between this-world and other-worlds; being that so much of the English language encodes a historical impulse to disappear the other-worldly in favor of a well-ordered mechanistic cosmos (a trajectory that has been in place since the Enlightenment), the differentiation between this-world and other-worlds remains a useful and necessary one, if only to confront the hard edged binaries of phallogocentrism.

Revisiting the elemental mechanics of meaning formation might help cut through some of the haze surrounding I-We gestationality. A readymade cognitive map groups together “we” with transcendence, and “I” with immanence. Transcendence and “we,” (at least in the way that they are habitually associated) are both metaphoric signs, whereas immanence and “I” are metonymic expressions in that they emanate discrete individualism (a prerequisite of contiguity) and diachrony (within this-worldly, linear time). The classic schematization of the symbolic process—courtesy of Ferdinand de Saussure—arranges metonymic combinations sequentially along a horizontal axis, while the transcendent associations of metaphor align vertically, in an imaginative stack.10 Any honest linguist or semiotician will note, however, that even the simplest metonym makes use of antirealist “poetry.” To enable the “the crown” to stand in for the

10 As is well known, Saussure never explicitly names metaphor or metonymy, and instead refers to syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations within language. It is Viktor Shklovsky’s formulation of prosaic (mundane) metonymy, and poetic (other-worldly) metaphor that enables Structuralist analysis to institute the by-now-unproblematic interchangeability between syntagmatics-metonymy and paradigmatics-metaphor.
monarch, metonymy sacrifices the sign of the monarch and imaginatively transforms it. In the same vein, for metaphor to mean, it depends on the sequential, contiguous placement of distinct semantic units. Put simply, metaphor functions metonymically, and vice versa. Mathematics dictates that two mutually constitutive sets can only be identical, so it follows that metaphor and metonymy are one and the same by definition. Even so, the reality of the symbolic process necessitates their difference, otherwise this sentence would reduce to a jumble of letters with no emergent meaning. The paradox of mutual constitution disrupts hierarchy and linear time—the two things necessary to constitute a story about who belongs to whom, or who begets whom. A generative paradox radiates out from metaphor-metonymy to transcendence-immanence, and to I-We (though not in order).

Living at the porous interface between I and We thus requires a leap of faith. Belief surpasses the tepid provisionality of “both are possible” and “both may be true”; it calls for a firm commitment to mutually exclusive truth claims and an unconditional embrace of the Other, the something-out-there that reconciles paradox. 11 Belief, in other words, reflexively relates, feels, analyzes and performs. It traverses the social and the affective, but not at the expense of logic. In this way belief distinguishes itself from fanaticism, which imposes, declares, and enacts. Fanaticism just as likely occurs inside a reeducation camp as it does inside a church. The central

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11 Though a logical embrace of paradox resists conceptualization, it may be surprisingly easy (trivial, as mathematicians like to say) to model visually. An old episode of Cosmos (one that I have failed to locate despite my best efforts) once showed Carl Sagan passing a three-dimensional potato through two-dimensional paper. For inhabitants of the two-dimensional world, the constantly shapeshifting cross-section of the potato would pose the gravest intellectual challenge. Viewers in the three-dimensional world, however, would easily see that the totality of the potato resolves the irreconcilable contradictions that mark two-dimensional observations. To tie this illustration back to the history of literary criticism, one could argue that the bad faith orthodoxy of the New Critics arose from their pretension of having access to the organic unity of the potato. Reflexive postsecular critique would make no such claims.
dilemma of postsecular storytelling becomes one of realizing the performative-interpretive of I-We in the wake of the burning bush of phallogocentrism.

Linguistic dilemmas readily compound into a host of social dilemmas, and every Indigenous character in *Green Grass* confronts a confluence of vocabularies, stories, and cultural products that have already defined them according to a racial metaphysic that pits Rational-Cultured-Ascendant-White against Superstitious-Ecological-Disappearing-Indian. The concept of the “Indian” is *the* principal example of a “terminal creed” reproduced *ad infinitum* in the dominant cultural simulations of America. As Vizenor explains, “The word *Indian* […] is a colonial enactment, not a loan word, […] an occidental invention that became a bankable simulation; the word has no referent in tribal languages or cultures” (11). The “postindian,” which marks the “absence of the invention” (11), endures the “lies and wicked burdens of discoveries, the puritanical destinies of monotheism […] with silence, traces of natural reason, trickster hermeneutics, the interpretation of tribal figurations, and the solace of heard stories” (17). The Blackfoot characters of *Green Grass* may lack the theoretical jargon, but they embody Indigenous *survivance* with their very being. Lionel Red Dog, perennially lost and down on his luck, sets himself on a wrong path at the young age of six, when he adopts John Wayne, “not the actor, but the character” as his role model (King 265-6). A number of “Big Mistakes” involving identity confusion lead him to his dead end job at Bill Bursum's electronics store. Charlie Looking Bear, Lionel’s cynical cousin, cashes in on the dominant culture’s idea of Indian-ness and works as a figurehead lawyer for the consortium that has built a dam on Blackfoot land. Like his Hollywood actor father, he finds himself haunted by misrecognition. Meanwhile Eli Stands Alone, Lionel’s uncle and a former English professor, has returned home after a long, self-
imposed exile to fight a lonely legal battle against the Grand Baleen Dam and its associated development projects, for reasons that escape him.

Weaving their way in and out of the lives of the Blackfoot characters of the novel are the stories narrated by four enigmatic “old Indians” named Lone Ranger, Ishmael, Robinson Crusoe, and Hawkeye. Their names and their existence precede the stories that produce them, and it is only within their respective stories that they (retroactively) reveal their Indigenous names to be First Woman, Changing Woman, Thought Woman, and Old Woman (respectively). Two observations argue for understanding the four women as different manifestations of one unified entity. First is the fact that their names, spoken one after another, narrate the stages of life that a person moves through. Second, in theory, the constitutive interdependence between the storytelling “I” and the collaborative “we” that makes possible the performative-interpretive of oral traditions renders the boundary between the storyteller and her audience porous, open to bidirectional influence and movement. The framing narrative of Green Grass dramatized such isomorphic fluidity in abundance, and there’s no reason to believe that the logic of gestational potentiality doesn’t extend to the four women, especially when the novel paints an ambivalent picture of their individualized embodiment:

Okay, says First Woman, and she puts on her black mask and walks to the front gate. It’s the Lone Ranger, the guards shout. It’s the Lone Ranger, they shout again, and they open the gate. So the Lone Ranger walks out of the prison, and the Lone Ranger and Ishmael and Robinson Crusoe and Hawkeye head west.

(King 106)
Where one reader might see Lone Ranger splitting into four different personalities, another might see Lone Ranger walking up to three other storytellers that had already been waiting outside the gate.

Embodiment continues to splinter and regroup along different storytelling axes. As “I” and Coyote weave their way through the storytelling expanses of the four women, Coyote observes “Old Coyote” spring into action. Strangely, nobody seems bothered by the temporal inconsistency of Old Coyote’s name preceding the Coyote that (together with “I”) made their existence possible in the first place. Either Coyote forgets the existence of Old Coyote, or their conjoined identity as a “we” is so unproblematic that Coyote expresses fear when “I” lays down some basic rules of symbolic embodiment in Thought Woman’s story:

“But there is only one Thought Woman,” says Coyote.

“That’s Right,” I says.

“And there is only one Coyote,” says Coyote.

“No,” I says. “This world is full of Coyotes.”

“Well,” says Coyote, “that’s frightening.”

“Yes it is,” I says. “Yes it is.” (King 302)

Lest one begins to think that the four storytellers are just symbols or metaphors for one woman, initiating a slide towards a monotheistic vision of spirituality, “I” reasserts the discreteness of Thought Woman and the self-contained integrity of her story. One is thus reminded that the four women were embodied separately from the get-go — I-We gestationally be damned.

The discrete cultural embodiments of Lone Ranger, Ishmael, Robinson Crusoe and Hawkeye could be said to parallel their dissimilarities as distinct Indigenous origin stories. Of note is the fact that the story of First Woman falling from the sky is a common Seneca oral
tradition, while Changing Woman points to a Navajo goddess, Thought Woman refers to the Pueblo creatrix, and Old Woman “is an archetypal helper to a culture hero” that plays a central role in Shawnee creation stories (Flick 161). For those that find the adaptation and concatenation of different storytelling traditions an unacceptable risk, the novel offers an obvious out. Equally conspicuous, however, is the novel’s invitation for readers to piece together their own understandings of the four storytellers and to thereby summon their own stories. As in King’s lecture/essay collection, The Truth About Stories, shifting the boundaries of the collective “we” becomes a central problematic of interpretation. Because of the way in which Green Grass refuses ontological capture, readers find themselves tasked with adjudicating which storied interpretations pose dangers and which might open new doors.

The biggest challenge of interpretation likely falls on Indigenous readers who have to puzzle through the differences and commonalities of divergent storytelling traditions. Limitations on space prevent all but the most cursory discussion of the Indigenous story traditions behind each of the four Women. At least in the context of the novel, strict tribal distinctions become increasingly cumbersome to maintain as storytelling motifs and themes spill over and into one another. Should grandmother turtle from First Woman’s story be understood as the turtle on whose back Sky Woman builds the earth in Iroquis/Huron/Seneca oral traditions? Could grandmother turtle also represent the turtle from whose back the Shawnee originated (“Native American Legends: Sky Woman,” “Shawnee Mythology”)? A Seneca reader might recognize the story of First Woman building an island on Grandmother Turtle’s back but find her name confusing, for the Seneca name for “First Woman” is Iagentci, “ancient woman” or Old Woman (“Native American Legends: Sky Woman”). Shawnee readers, in turn, might reach for their own understanding of the creator Kokumthena, “Our Grandmother” when they first
encounter the name Old Woman in *Green Grass* (“Shawnee Mythology”), but find the lack of correspondence between Old Woman’s story and the creation story of *Kokumthena* puzzling. Navajo readers who know that “the earth and its life-giving, life sustaining, and life-producing qualities are associated with and derived from Changing Woman” might take the presence of water in *Green Grass* as a generative key (“Changing Woman”), while Laguna Pueblo readers might do the same with their knowledge(s) of their “Mater-creatrix” variously known as Spider Woman, Yellow Woman, and Thought Woman.

Leslie Marmon Silko’s article “Language and Literature from a Pueblo Indian Perspective” explains how “Thought Woman, by thinking of her sisters, and together with her sisters, thought of everything that is.” (79). For the Laguna Pueblo, words create worlds, and “thought as knowledge informs the conception of words” (Swan 310). The Navajo articulate a similar knowledge of language’s relationship to the world in Changing Woman’s parentage: First Boy, her father, represents thought, while First Girl, her mother, represents speech (“Changing Woman”). Their synthesis ensures the perpetuation of all life and living things. Further complicating the picture are the Navajo’s own stories of Thought Woman/Spider Woman, who acts as a helper and benefactor to humans (“Native American Legends: Spider Woman”). It is entirely up to Indigenous readers to adjudicate the ethics of interweaving/spinning/blending different story traditions. *Green Grass* performs the ever-evasive dance of staking the stories of First Woman, Changing Woman, Thought Woman, and Old Woman firmly to Indigeneity without tying them down to the level of tribal specificity. The degree to which the four storytellers can be considered individual personifications of one condensed being depends in no small part on the mutual intelligibility of their multifaceted tribal referents.
Postsecular criticism problematizes translation. The narrative plane of this-world, predicated on a differential epistemological-ontological foundation, exerts a horizontally flattening effect on the omnidirectional potentialities of I-We gestationality. The epistemological-ontological foundation is a product of Western intellectual history, kickstarted during the Enlightenment by an instrumentalist view of language and fully clarified in Saussure’s claim that “in language there are only differences without positive terms” (120).12 Differential mechanics writ large as cultural habit/political metaphysic becomes “me against you” and “us versus them.” The this-worldly storylines of Eli, Alberta, Latisha, Charlie, and Lionel illustrate unhappy subjectivities that have been hailed into existence by a culture and an ideology that only recognizes them as Other. Though they exceed the denotations of their signifier (“Indian”) by simply existing, their embodied enmeshment in a complex web of institutions and ideologies spreads them thin. A sense of exhaustion and alienation accompanies physical displacement over inter-/intra-national borders, as illustrated in Eli’s journey to and from the University of Toronto, Lionel’s many mishaps (especially his unintended involvement in the Wounded Knee Occupation), and Alberta’s formative memory of border agents confiscating her father’s sacred headdress. Physical displacement mirrors spiritual unmooring, and one might select a few examples from Eli and Lionel’s consumption habits. Eli’s induction into Western bourgeoisie reading society by Karen obviously leads to his self-alienation. Other societal forces are less visible and more pernicious; the John Wayne Western that mesmerizes beholders of “The Map” (a wall of TV displays arranged to look like North America) at Wild Bill Bursum’s electronics store caps off the supply chain for one particularly far-reaching, vertically integrated product

12 It’s worth pointing out that Saussure himself fails to stick by his “new rule” and readily concedes that the totality of the sign constitutes “something that is positive in its own class” (120). Nevertheless, poststructuralism and deconstruction would readily absorb his radical declaration.
portfolio that connects and envelops Eli (who guiltily reads the book spin off in his spare time), Charlie, Lionel, and the four storytellers.

No “real world” character can match the scale of displacement that the four women storytellers go through, so their stories require separate consideration. In terms of this-worldly space, their trek from a mental institution in Florida to a Blackfoot reservation in southern Alberta surpasses the movement range of all Blackfoot characters of the novel. Measurements of distance mean little anyway, and the same goes for the idea of physical containment, since Dr. Hovaugh’s hospital records reveal that the women had voluntarily left and returned to the hospital at least thirty-seven times, some of their departures coinciding with natural disasters in places as far off as Indonesia (Krakatoa, to be exact). To no one’s surprise, the women traverse a multiplicity of worlds in the novel. Their other-worldly journeys occur within their respective story cycles, and each of their story cycles are bookended by a complete storytelling performance by “I” and Coyote, which comprises a volume. First Woman tells a story in which she builds an island on Grandmother Turtle's back where people, plants and animals all live in relation to one another. She lives with Ahdamn, who instigates a linguistic dispute by proceeding to name animals who already know their own names. Disagreement between Ahdamn’s free-floating signifiers and the positivized identities of the animals summons G O D, who cannot abide disorder. Ahdamn’s clumsy attempt at classifying and naming the animals (he cycles through microwave oven, garage sale, telephone book, and cheeseburger) immediately causes G O D to establish proprietary rights over all that exists. He insists that “this is my world and this is my garden” (72), and in response First Woman rebukes him for “acting as if you have no

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13 Volume seems to be the most appropriate term to use here, not only because of the way that it prompts reflection on the dialogic relationship between individual volumes (I) and the novel as a whole (we), but also because each volume spans a complete ritualized story formula/performance.
relations” (73). First Woman and Ahdamn leave the garden, starting a chain of events that lead to their imprisonment at historical Fort Marion, where she disguises herself as Lone Ranger to escape.

The second story cycle, told by the aptly named Changing Woman, introduces an intermediary step between the biblical opening and the close at Fort Marion. Putting behind an unpleasant encounter with a lecherous Noah, Changing woman strikes up a friendship with a black lesbian whale named Moby Jane, and their semi-erotic romp in the ocean metaphorizes a relational horizon that is always “swimming and rolling and diving and sliding and spraying” (248). Captain Ahab’s ship, when it arrives, offers a predictable contrast in worldview, where a black vs white binary and the metaphysical exigency of hunting the phallic white whale drives Ahab and his men into a violent frenzy. “Blackwhaleblackwhalesblackwhalesblackwhale” lingers as a defining call for a story that ends with Changing Woman’s transformation into, who else, but Ishmael (196).

Changing Woman’s slight variation on the story structure introduced by First Woman is one that persists in the stories then told by Thought Woman and Old Woman. Taking a hint from her name, one might venture that First Woman’s story dramatizes first principles: things must be named and things must become property in order for Western thought to emerge. The knowledge to property regime that secular modernity depends on represents the main preoccupation of the first story cycle, so First Woman plots a straightforward transition from the Garden of Eden to Fort Marion. Changing Woman then, modifies the formula to magnify the complicity of literature. Whereas First Woman litters the way to Fort Marion with literary references to the original Lone Ranger (in the form of dead rangers), Changing Woman makes her literary references come to life in Moby Jane and Captain Ahab’s ship. Slight differences aside, the
fundamental structure remains the same in all four story cycles, where an indeterminate female protagonist encounters biblical figures and icons from Western literature/culture, gets defined as an “Indian” by armed colonial forces, and consequently adopts an externally imposed name/signifier to escape Fort Marion. For the postsecularists among their audience, each of the stories told by the four women tell the tale of North American secularism emerging out of European Christian tradition and in its self-possessed hubris, sacrificing the “Indian” to forget its “superstitious” origins. Grouped together into a single storytelling performance, the four women’s stories illustrate the historical emergence of the sign of the “Indian,” starting with Western epistemology in the Garden of Eden, moving through colonial violence and paternalism, and ending with Nasty Bumppo’s racial metaphysics. Secular critics, on the other hand, will hear the stories of Ishmael, Robinson Crusoe, and Hawkeye and remind themselves of Mathew Arnold’s infallible insight that with the onset of modernity, God became a literary term.

Many storytelling traditions incorporate dialogic interpretation into their forms, with some processes subtly influencing the story while others formalizing themselves into back and forth arguments, for example (Fitz 115-31). Interpretation holds one half of the key to the medium’s infinite adaptability and liveliness. That audiences interpret stories needs no further elaboration; more interesting is how a living story interprets its communal context and the world, which of course, starts spilling into the territory of performance. What sets the story telling “interpretive” apart from literary interpretation lies in the “nature” of storytelling as cooperative process art, performed at the thin border between the storytelling-interpreting I and We. As Marshall McLuhan’s famous catchphrase goes, “the medium is the message.” The title of the novel performs this point in miniature. “Green grass, running water” reinterprets and reforms a historical trope wherein the U.S. government used variations on the phrase “as long as the grass
is green and the waters run” in their treaties with Indigenous tribes to signal the permanence of treaty rights. The original phrase anchors its textual authority in two ontological claims: grass, in essence, is green, and the nature of water is to run. In retrospect, the phrase can only be read cynically. Who among the Indigenous signatories could’ve foreseen the white man’s workaround—a massive technocratic bureaucracy that oversees the green-ness of the grass and the properly utilized flow of the water? The “solution” continues an American managerial tradition that counts upon and retroactively ensures the disappearance of the sign of the Indian, whether by assimilation or extermination.14 The storyteller’s fix to the “solution” is surprisingly simple: “Green grass running water” discards the ontological pretension of an is and converts history into an indeterminate expanse for an ongoing negotiation between interpretation and performance, between an I and a We constantly absorbing into and gestating one another.

If the track record of the four “old Indians” is any indication, even the best storytellers in the world face steep odds if they hope to reform history, for the triumphant history of secular modernity too, is an immensely popular narrative of long pedigree, with powerful narrators and whole nations’ worth of captive listeners and readers. Carlton Smith, in performing discourse analysis on Green Grass, summarizes the French theorist Michel de Certeau’s account of the historico-textual challenge:

the speech of the other must be exiled from historical and ethnological reportage, made “exotic,” for it is precisely that which holds the potential to destabilize the “continuity of signs” desired by such accounts. Writing thus “produces history” as an “archive” whose “will to power is invested in its form” and whose mission is “the manufacture of time and reason.” (Smith 527)

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14 See Robert Nichols’ Theft is Property! Dispossession and Critical Theory (2019) for a detailed account of how the historical process of recursive dispossession arose in the context of Anglo settler expansion in the Americas.
Smith continues to circle back to discursive webs, shedding light on how narrative play in Green Grass directs readerly attention to the reader's own embedded perceptions. The analytic apparatus that Smith brings to bear is a highly productive one, one that places him in relation to an interpretive community that professes a shared interest in narrative as a cultural product subtended by disciplinary form. Greg Bechtel reads Green Grass as a “syncretic” intervention (with full knowledge of the term’s controversial presupposition of uncontaminated purity) in the traditionally Christian form of fantasy. Circumventing the slippery topic of religion entirely, Ibis Gómez-Vega invokes the neat dualism of magical realism to perform a focused generic reading, while others have homed in on intertextuality (Laura Donaldson) or the colonial literary archive (James Cox).

Smith’s essay represents the most sustained attempt at theorizing the “spirituality” of Green Grass, and it’s an admirable one. His historicization of trickster scholarship begins with the anthropological typology of Paul Radin and William Bright, and segues into Vizenor’s critique of the anthropomorphized trickster. Vizenor’s de-humanization and narrativization of the trickster dovetails nicely with Anne Doueihi’s turn to the semiotic realm, a move she performs to extract the trickster from the “great story which is the history of religion” (qtd. in Smith 518). Tisa Wenger’s We Have A Religion describe how Pueblo Indians under Spanish rule came to refer to Catholicism simply as religión, while Franciscan missionaries, “Frustrated by the practical difficulties of enforcing the laws against Indian ‘idolatry,’ […] began to define indigenous practices as costumbres” (28). Indigenous people throughout Latin America continue to refer to their traditions as customs to this day(5), and in America too, conversion to Christianity had frequently been referred to as an act of getting one’s religion.15

federal statutes and supreme court cases make clear, the state maintains a vested interest in its histories of religion, property, and conservation, and all three always-already inscribe the disappearance of the “Indian.”

It stands to reason that language stages the symbolic battleground par excellence for liberation. A key insight of Indigenous Studies is that language, in a sense, lives: it effects change, it summons, it wills. At the same time, says the honest postsecularist, language as we know it in this-world is categorically dead. The two truth claims need not cancel each other out. Yet to openly embrace self-contradiction risks ridicule in the knowledge-production regime of the academy, and even scholars as perspicacious as Doueihi, whether as a function of self-conscious storytelling or disciplinary self-defense, have so often consolidated the religious and the spiritual into objects of “social-scientific knowledge in a way that takes for granted the secular character of explanation itself” (Warner 210). The forceful rhetoric of Doueihi’s antihistoricism diminishes in her concluding statement on the liberatory potential of trickster narratives:

it is the power of signification, the possibility to mean, that the Trickster celebrates…in the Trickster's universe, everything is already a sign of something. The universe is essentially linguistic and infinitely interpretable. Trickster is thus not a sacred being, but the way the whole universe may become meaningful, sacred, and filled with “power.” (Doueihi 309)

The final sentence stings the most in the way that it reinscribes the master trope of secularization as narrated by Hegel, in which Christ’s death and disappearance “is no longer transcendence from the world but transcendence into the world, understood to be constituted by nature and finite human being” (Regan 138). Doueihi may have inverted the trope, consequently re-
enchanting the world instead of secularizing it, but that ending too, is too easy, too facile: what she has done is rewind the clock back to that thing she finds so intolerable, historical origin. A more sympathetic reading will suggest that Doueihi dismantles the sign of the sacred being as a Western construct—she ditches consolidated “being” to suffuse the universe with the “sacred.” But such a move surely amounts to dissolving the sign as a discrete semiotic unit itself. In a universe where “everything is already a sign of something,” Doueihi has effectively pronounced the trickster dead, exposing the limits of purely discursive figurations of the trickster.

Critique shouldn’t detract from the acknowledgement of debt. Postsecular criticism, whatever it shapes up to be in Indigenous studies, stands on the shoulders of thinkers like Vizenor and Doueihi. Quite evidently, post-structuralist concerns still wield significant influence in literary interpretation, postsecular or not. Dislocating the received reception of a text involves opening it up to a plurality of meanings, none of which can lay claim to the totality of perspectives. Instead of hammering the square peg of religious metaphysics and cosmology into the round hole of pluralism, the postsecular critic has tended to look around to ask who made the holes round to begin with. Green Grass, with its polymorphous pegs, asks if holes are even the right idea.

As an epistemological frame and a governing principle, pluralism has sometimes created a troublesome proximity between postmodern analysis and liberalism. When it comes to Green Grass, the question is how I-We gestationality distinguishes itself from E pluribus unum. Authenticity, that wellspring of deep self-identification, is noticeably in short supply in Green Grass. In other-worlds, authenticity obviously cannot exist, for without the discrete, bounded,

16 Though the category of the sacred does not exempt itself from the history of Christian theology either, one gets the sense of what Doueihi is arguing.
“real” self, who would be there to desire authenticity in the first place? That said, in secular modernity, I and We both embody discrete individualism, and both draw sustenance from the overconsumption of authenticity narratives. The way that Green Grass exceeds worlds can place it in an uncomfortable position with respect to this-worldly politics. Liberation politics, for example, has nothing to gain from Lionel’s sister Latisha when she instills nationalist identification in her infant son by incanting “You are a Canadian. You are a Canadian. You are a Canadian” (176). Even after she escapes the dialectic entrapment of her American husband, her politics as the proprietor of Dead Dog Café, serving diner food with a side of self-deprecating stereotype, is at best ambivalent, though one cannot help but admire the ingenuity of the storyteller that brings together Indigenous survivance and other-worldly presence under a single ironic sign.

Likewise, the fallibility of Coyote and the storytellers, who habitually revert to Western textual and generic authority to tell their stories (pp.10-1, 220, 387 represent some overt examples), make them rather unreliable as political allies. Green Grass just as easily dissolves individual/collective identities as it recombines new ones. Together, the supernatural actors of Green Grass spin a web of creative associations between the historic Fort Marion, a fictional Blackfoot reservation in modern Canada, Cherokee idi:gawé:sdì ("to say it, one") (Kilpatrick xiv), and a pastiche of figures from various Indigenous traditions. Critics such as Jane Korkka and Bechtel have tied the text’s challenge of authenticity to King's own “hybrid” background, which “combines two European cultures and the Native American—not Native Canadian—Cherokee heritage, while his texts often evoke a Native Canadian Blackfoot setting” (qtd. in Bechtel 212). Whatever the case, Green Grass, as a story that tells itself and tells on itself, exposes the impossibility of positivized, discrete identities in the very act of summoning them.
Postsecular criticism brings to the table the insight that one only needs to believe that there exists such a thing as a Blackfoot or a Native American in order for one to be able to reach for it.

Summoning, in this sense, involves much more than evoking signs in the wasteland of postmodern simulacra. It involves reaching into the subsurface of this-worldly reality and bringing “something” up, if only momentarily. It fills Vizenorian silence with incantations, movements, experience, and presence. In theory it makes possible the impossible positivization of a Native American. Modifying the semiotic realm to achieve a closer correspondence with Indigenous rituals and ceremonies might allow for a fuller realization of “shadows,” which Vizenor explains as “that sense of intransitive motion to the referent; the silence in memories […] shadows are the motion that mean the silence, but not the presence or absence of entities” (64). Likewise, Vizenor’s intuition of “shadow histories,” the felt presence of a prenarrative identity that exceeds all stories might find their most concrete embodiment through a ritual-symbolic medium.

Summoning doesn’t always work, and even when it does, the summoned figure always already implies its own inversion on the way becoming something else, another relation. I-We gestationality helps simplify the picture once again. Because I and We already contain each other, their relational logic lies outside of time, outside of this-worldly conceptualization. When transposed onto linear, this-worldly time, their gestationality gets scrambled into an endless chain of I → We → I figurations. An I might identify with a We, only to suffer a moment of misrecognition that brings back the I; a We might incorporate itself into a bigger We, in which case the initial We must categorically invert itself into an I first, narrating We→I→We. One senses a kind of “will” or “momentum” propelling the process; in this way I-We gestationality
helps explain the motivation that activates Vizenorian shadows. Also important to note is the fact that the I → We chain represents a full secularization of I-We gestationality, and that it requires no supernatural help to proceed. The storyline of Eli’s life, for example, emplots a progression from his interpellation into bourgeoisie reading society (We), to his alienation and eventual return (I), and finally to his participation in the Sun Dance (We). It is only with his return to water that he breaks the chain, skipping an intermediary I in joining a radically indeterminate, incomprehensibly other We, marking other-worldly intervention.

All considered, it becomes clear that I-We gestationality only describes—it doesn’t execute. “Conjuration,” “divination,” “healing,” “summoning,” and “witchcraft” are the kinds of activities that do the “dirty work” of enabling other-worldly gestationality to slip in through the interstices. Confronting the freighted Eurocentrism of each of the terms just mentioned is beyond the scope of this thesis, which means that interpretation will have to proceed from component ritual elements instead of the larger categorical structures that contain them; if reference to conjuration, divination or other such practices and their practitioners is made, it points to a placeholder sign that future scholarship will have to reform. Unlike the jerry-rigged signs attempting to signify them, nothing is makeshift about the Indigenous “medicomagical” tradition. The expertise, embodied presence, and relational awareness of a good medicine man is what prevents the indiscriminate practice of conjuration or summoning. Despite Green Grass’ inexorable disruption of boundaries and borders, the presence of ritual invites a dive into region. The novel’s volume headings, which each encode a direction and a color in Sequoyah (Cherokee) syllabary, and the untranslated incantations that start off First Woman’s story (after a series of clichéd misfires) signal that the reader ignores region at their own risk (King 12).
In his anthropological study of the sacred formulae of the “western Cherokee,” Alan Kilpatrick describes the painstaking work he undertook to amass field notes, ritual texts, personal letters, and personal testimonies from his informants. Though his target group is what he terms the “western” Cherokee (members of the modern-day Cherokee Nation located in present-day Oklahoma) his textual artifacts come from a broader geographical area, shadowing the historical path of removal. His description of where excerpts from medicine books are “naturally” found portrays a textual culture intimately embedded in the land:

Fragments of these esoteric texts have also come to light in the most unlikely places: squirreled away in the trunks of dead trees, buried in jars beneath surreptitiously marked stones, or kept as family heirlooms by the descendants of these medicine men, who become terribly evasive when asked by strangers about the existence of such manuscripts. One suspects that a considerable number of these medicine books may yet be hidden away in rural northeastern Oklahoma or in the Smokey Mountain region of Tennessee and North Carolina.¹⁷ (Kilpatrick 24)

The idea of region is an imperfect but useful one because all idi:gawé:sdí begin with a process of self identification, and for the Cherokee, “region” provides the grounds for identification. Region

¹⁷ A postsecular critique of Kilpatrick’s monograph could and should be an essay in of itself. Read against the grain, Kilpatrick’s ethnographic and methodological accounts narrate the story of a scholar repeatedly brushing up against disciplinary boundaries, but ultimately choosing to avoid confrontation (a pattern that Kilpatrick might attribute to the Cherokee preference for reaching agreements). His literature review draws a straight line from King James’ dissertation on demonology to the emergence of witchcraft as an analytical category in anthropology. Despite his keen awareness of cultural and phenomenological differences, Kilpatrick adopts the Eurocentric categories of his discipline with very little protest. From his personal anecdotes it seems clear that he respects, and to some extent believes in the power of conjuration, healing, and divination; one cannot help but wonder if a subtext exists beneath his descriptions of himself “managing” informant resistance or paging through uprooted idi:gawé:sdí in the Bienecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale (ironically, Yale had purchased its collection from Kilpatrick’s own parents, who were also anthropologists of Cherokee descent).
marks the intersection between space and *ulanigvyv*, “energy deriving from such phenomena as lightning and running water and from spiritual beings, including animals [...] human beings and certain plants and materials objects” (Fogelson qtd. in Irwin 255). Language too, ties itself to place/space, as reflected in the names of the two dominant surviving Cherokee dialects such as the Eastern and Overhill (or what is now simply known as Oklahoma Cherokee) dialects (“The Cherokee Nation and its Language” 12). Within his rather unusual classification of “western Cherokee” (which by all indications appear equivalent to Oklahoma Cherokee) Kilpatrick also differentiates a number of sub-dialects with names such as “cherry tree place,” “Echota place,” and “thread place” (Kilpatrick 45), reminding readers of Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang’s insight that Indigenous peoples are those with languages and stories that tell “how we/they came to be a place” (6). Indeed, Kilpatrick notes considerable stylistic differences between “western” (or Overhill/Oklahoma) Cherokee *idi:gawé:sdi* and their more formally conservative eastern counterparts (recovered from parts of North Carolina), and he cautiously imputes the “literary balkanization” of western *idi:gawé:sdi* to the trauma caused by historic removal. Precise nominal identification at the start of an *idi:gawé:sdi* thus not only locates the supplicant and their clan, but also exposes “the essence of his personality upon which spiritual action may be taken” (Kilpatrick 29).

Moving on, the following stages of *idi:gawé:sdi* involve the “invocation of supernatural forces [...]” The actualization of magic through the use of time-conflating adverbial modifiers and [...] the vehicle of color symbolism [...]and] The stabilization or homeostasis of the spell achieved through imperative commands” (Kilpatrick 28). In this context, it makes sense that Lone Ranger’s story cycle couldn’t begin until she invoked her Indigenous name, First Woman, in Cherokee: “Higayv:ligé:i” (King 12). Non-metaphoric correspondences between *idi:gawé:sdi*
and the ritual incantations presented in *Green Grass*, however, must stop there. To reconstruct a loose translation of the incantations based on Kilpatrick’s monograph would miss the point, for when it comes to transformational language, its inaccessibility is the point.\textsuperscript{18} Forcing the translation of a text that one has not *related* their way into commits the interpretive equivalent of cultural theft and displacement. There are concerns beyond ethics as well: the idea of extracting an interpretive key from the Sequoyah syllabary betrays a romanticized notion of Cherokee ritual texts as a source of ultimate authenticity. As Kilpatrick explains, the corpus of *idi:gawé:sdi* reflects “an amalgamation of diverse cultural influences that were introduced over time” (42) including Muskogean and (possibly) Natchez and Choctaw loanwords, phrases, and concepts. Most intriguing is Kilpatrick’s claim that “A surprising number of Cherokee ritual specialists […] professed Christianity during their lifetimes […] as a result […] infusing their magical texts with such Christian elements as ‘amen ’and ‘in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost!’” (41). Once more, discrete autonomy teases its presence, only to dissolve away.

So how do regionally embedded Cherokee ritual texts reflect on *Green Grass*? What commentaries do they provide on the act of interpretation? As long as interpretation involves the symbolic realm, bringing *idi:gawé:sdi* to bear involves metaphorization. One must pause here. Didn’t Cutcha Risling Baldy so powerfully argue against just such a move when she said “Coyote is not a metaphor?” (1). In her essay, she explains how Western anthropologists and philosophers tend to classify Coyote as a universal trickster archetype, which subordinates “Coyote First Person” to a narrative of evolving human consciousness (16). Put differently, Western interpretations of Coyote have turned Coyote First Person into a sacrificial vehicle for

\textsuperscript{18} “*transformational language* […] replete with ritualisms, archaisms, loan words, and unusual verb forms […] can bear as little resemblance to ordinary Cherokee discourse as Chaucer’s Old English does to the writings of James Joyce” (Kilpatrick 25).
the tenor that is historical progress. The universalization of “Coyote First Person separates Coyote First Person from his/her people and his/her land and erases an important intent of Coyote’s stories — to establish an everlasting connection and responsibility to the land and its inhabitants” (16). Baldy takes pains to explicate the constitutive link between Coyote First Person’s stories and Coyote First Person as an embodiment of Indigenous epistemologies, so it should be noted that when Baldy says Coyote First Person’s stories “intend” to (re)establish an inseverable connection between indigeneity and land, she speaks in metaphor. In this light, the title of her essay acts more as a rhetorical gesture than a truth claim. Viewed from a radically different angle, however, one might say that Baldy speaks literally from within a knowledge-belief system where Coyote First Person’s stories intend in the same way that words can mean, and thereby create. In either case, what Baldy unequivocally declares to Western social science is that Coyote is not your metaphor, which befits the way that Other worlds avail themselves in this world. In “Godzilla vs. Post-Colonial,” King explains how “associational literature” guards its secrets: “For the non-native reader, this literature provides a limited and particular access […] allowing the reader to associate with that world without being encouraged to feel part of it” (188). One could imagine a kind of cryptography where the message changes and re-encrypts itself as it is being read. The unlocking of new meanings requires that the right person with the right relations and the right code knows where to look.

Some might characterize the mode of reading and writing just described as spiritually charged obscurantism. That is fine and well. Detractors will also point out that Baldy summons Indigenous metaphysics in her articulation of an eternal connection between Indigenous people and their lands, and thereby commits a universalization of her own. Between her relentless questioning of universal “truth” and “fact,” and her invocation of an inseverable, everlasting
connection to land, the same critics will spot the kind of inconsistency that cause many “working within a wide range of different forms of critical theory [to] impute to Indigenous peoples a mystifying exoticism that belies their intellectual contributions” (Nichols 12). Postsecularism as interpretive methodology doesn’t belittle secular critique. Rather, it attempts to correct for the paucity of interpretation under a historically shaped knowledge production regime. The supernatural world that Baldy invokes is a powerful one, one where the land isn’t an extension of geography, but is an uninterrupted gradation(s) of sacred power (much like in Doueihi’s vision, minus a good portion of the poststructuralist baggage), and a name is meaning. Baldy may very well have access to that world, but as far as non-Indigenous interpretation is concerned, that is neither here nor there. The postsecularist begins with the acknowledgement that it is not for critics of this world to resolve the paradox of Indigenous metaphysics. Believing in the validity of the other world, the postsecular critic extends the logic of the intermediary medium that they have access (and a responsibility) to, in order to build symbolic I → We → … relations across levels of interpenetrating thematic (self)organization: this work is always performed in a way that circles back to the paradox of I-We gestationality that made interpretation possible in the first place.

It is best to preface demonstration with comparison. Smith, along with Flick, have discussed the historical references at play in an early scene in Green Grass in which Alberta (the history professor who’s seeing Charlie and Lionel) first introduces the historical Fort Marion to her college students. Familiar names from Native American history make an appearance in Alberta’s student roster, including Henry Dawes and John Collier. As Smith notes, “King’s reference to these famous ‘students ’ of Indian cultures alludes to the inevitable and disastrous result of objectifying Native American society” (522). Henry Dawes of course, refers to the
senator famous for pushing forward the Dawes Act of 1887, which fundamentally restructured tribal relationships to land in the United States. Passed without any Indigenous consent or input, the act “promised to break up the tribe as a social unit, encourage private enterprise and farming, reduce the cost of Indian administration, fund the emerging boarding school system (with the sale of 'surplus land’), and provide a land base for white settlement” (Treuer 145). The Ojibwe anthropologist and critic David Treuer quotes Merrill Gates, chairman of the Board of Indian Commissioners from 1899-1912, to capture the spirit of the law: “We must make the Indian more intelligently selfish […] By acquiring property, man puts forth his personality and lays hold of matter by his own thought and will” (144). In Alberta's class, the transformed Henry Dawes supplies his professor with a sustained exchange on Plains Indian Ledger Art, which as explained by Alberta, were produced in Fort Marion by twenty-six (out of seventy-two) southern Plains Natives who had been captured by the U.S. Army in 1874. Unable to see beyond his ignorance, Dawes demonstrates a complete inability to understand Indigenous art. When prompted, he states that “they’re kind of like stick figures” and that they “use browns and reds a lot […] Maybe it was traditional or something like that” (King 17). For a critic like Smith, the interaction presents a “fixed homogenetic cultural matrix” (522), which is about all there is to say; having set up his analytic apparatus using this scene, Smith sees that he has bigger fish to fry and moves on to bluer waters.

Nobody could fault Smith, for Green Grass teems with an overabundance of cultural references and allusions. One could extract meaning with abandon. But what if interpretive methodology attempted to absorb into the world of the Green Grass and embody the text’s inexhaustibility as much as it extracted from it? What might that look like? The metonymically reproduced Henry Dawes can appear exhausted as a sign, but the metonym already gestates a
metaphor, and the metaphor inherently unfurls a metonymic chain (and so on and so forth) so postsecular interpretation might as well let the text read itself. For starters, by imaginatively cutting through time and recognizing the present-day college student Henry Dawes (I) within a historic *We* that included like-minded compatriots of the historical Dawes—say fellow members of the “Friends of the Indian”—a crystal clear historic picture emerges. In Native American history, the sign of Henry Dawes signifies the homogeneous space of capital, what “Henri Lefebvre describes as the […] ‘subordination [of land] to the unifying but abstract principle of property ’antithetical to the sacred and to ‘lived experience’” (qtd. in Huhndorf 361). A distorted relationship with the land results in an inability to comprehend Indigenous art. Interpretive incapacity can signal many things, from intellectual obstinance to lack of knowledge, but fundamentally, it reveals a break in how a person comes to know in the first place (which then of course, feeds into how one relates to the land). Indigenous art, like Coyote First Person’s stories, are “living Indigenous epistemologies” (Baldy 5). The machinations of the Western epistemological-ontological foundation that causes both embodiments of Henry Dawes to perceive Indigenous culture only as primitive and “traditional” remains untouched through time.

The greatest strength of postsecular criticism might very well lie in its willingness to associate and relate beyond the confines of nation statist space-time. Alberta’s classroom keys readers in to this other-worldly space by gathering Henry Dawes, Mary Rowlandson and Hannah Duston in the same room (another *We*). The historical Mary Rowlandson was a colonial Massachusetts Puritan woman who had been living in the frontier settlement of Lancaster when she was captured by allied Indigenous warriors during King Philip’s War (Cloyd 78). Her autobiographical captivity narrative became one of colonial America’s earliest best sellers in 1682 and went on to define the genre (78). Meanwhile, Hannah Duston, another famous name in
the genre, is often characterized as the “mother of the American tradition of scalp-hunting” (Grenier 40-1). From Mary Rowlandson to John Collier—their implausible, other-worldly synchronicity constructs a diachronic story on the role that cultural imagination has played in justifying and perpetuating colonial violence. The postsecular interpreter summons a story that makes no temporal, spatial, or categorical distinction between a college student’s dismissal of Indigenous art, the military conquest of southern Plains Native Nations, and the benevolent, reformist policies of John Collier. Violence is violence.

Thus, Green Grass begins to spill out of its physical embodiment as a discrete, mass market paperback book. It builds new associations beyond the text that encourage readers to understand that the latest colonial justifications for controlling Indigenous land, no matter their “good intentions” are still in bad faith. But books with no interest in matters beyond this-world can build hypertextual bridges too. After all, Smith has already offered a perfectly reasonable, this-worldly explanation of the interpretive agency of Green Grass:

As a novel it “theorizes” itself, rather than becoming the repository/subject or object of theoretical discussion. More important, as a trickster narrative the novel marks the reader’s necessary ability to recreate the text, rather denoting the ways in which the text fractures and recreates itself. For King, and for trickster fictions in general, the individual and orality combine to function as a subtextual counter-narrative to written textuality. (Emphasis mine; Smith 532)

Chapter 1 already problematized the post- in postsecular, so it’s no surprise that Smith’s insight describes a lot of what goes on in the name of postsecular critique. Small cracks can turn into surprisingly large openings, however. The key argument of this chapter is that more than just
theorizing itself, *Green Grass* conjures/divinates/purifies/heals itself, and central to that process is discrete individuality's willingness to recognize that it is always-already dissolving.

Returning to Alberta’s history lecture, one could choose to view it as a framing narrative for the four ensuing stories told by the four storytellers, though strictly speaking, in “I’s” plotting, the storyteller’s opening ritual precedes Alberta’s class. Since the opening ritual occurs outside of this-worldly space and time, there’s no way to tell if it actually “precedes” Alberta’s lecture in any meaningful sense. As already explained, who came before whom is not something that the four storytellers worry themselves over anyway. Transposing text based ritual onto the symbolic realm illuminates an intriguing connection between Alberta’s lecture and the opening act of an *idi:gawé: sdi*—self-identification. Ritualistically (and metaphorically) speaking, Alberta’s lecture declares *this is my name* (Kilpatrick 29), *these are my people* (29), *we are stuck in history*. The essence of history has been made the target of supernatural intervention. Alberta’s identification summons the four storytellers whose temporal logics (since they precede their own origin stories) cannot be accounted for, at least in this-world. More specifically, in terms of their respective plotting, their Western “given” names always precede, and then take over their Indigenous names, which mirrors the tautological trap that Alberta has summoned them into: *I think I am an Indian, therefore I am* (Bailey 44). Alberta’s self-identification, in other words, predetermines the course of her spell: each of the four storytellers end their stories with the appearance of Fort Marion, while in this-world, Alberta’s world, all of the four story tellers (as Lone Ranger, Ishmael, Robinson Crusoe, and Hawkeye) return to Dr. Joseph Hovaugh’s hospital in Florida (which, as if the pun on Joe Hovaugh’s name wasn’t enough, comes with its own perfectly organized garden, described in detail the volume that encodes “East” in its header) again not too far from the historic fort. The I-We gestationality of the four storytellers causes
their origin stories to fill out a fractal relational diagram. Each of the four stories represent distinct, self-contained, ritual(ized) story performances. Put together, the four performances collapse into one unified performance, with Alberta as the unwitting medicine (wo)man that performs the introductory incantation. Alberta’s seemingly “immaculate” conception in the final volume of the novel takes on a whole new level of significance in this context; in addition to subverting reproductive heteronormativity, it instantiates Indigenous auto-poiesis. Without her even knowing, Alberta has accomplished an interruption in history that might enable Indigeneity to finally gestate itself. Or she’s just pregnant.

Storied meaning conjured itself in the case of Alberta and the four story tellers; a question remains as to whether the reader/audience can symbolically conjure stories and meanings on their own. It might be worth a very cautious and very limited try. Baldy gives this irresponsible novice conjurer a possible in with her metaphysical claim that stories by Coyote First Person eternally link Indigeneity to land. Baldy’s insight—it must be noted that in Old and Middle English, insight meant “penetrating with the eyes of the understanding into the […] hidden nature of things” (OED)—is the other-worldly force that this non-Indigenous settler, performing this symbolic conjuration according to the exigencies of academic life on dispossessed Muscogee (Creek) land, will invoke. Unlike the conjurer, who uses verbal dexterity to unsettle time, this interpreter will utilize the thematic/organizational mutability of I-We gestationality to think through time to the best of his ability, though he makes no promises.

The preceding chapter laid bare the Christian roots of (American) secularism. It also borrowed the words of Deloria and Vizenor to demonstrate that the sign of the “Indian” has played a crucial role in consolidating the foundational pillars of secular, North American modernity: proprietary rights, homogenized, socially organized space, and the rational, self-
possessed subject. The Other in the shape of an “Indian wilderness” has always acted as the sacrificial vehicle for the construction of American/Canadian nation space-time.\(^{19}\) The story of secular modernity is the story of disappearing the Native to tame the wilderness. The introduction of technology and technocracy merely switched out the actors to the same old story.\(^{20}\) The triumphant story of secular modernity is what this thesis seeks to disturb. Up until now, in a roundabout way, I’ve been narrating a story of how the this-world of *Green Grass* came to be. Now I beg the interpretive community’s indulgence as I try to bring to life an associational narrative of my own that 1) cuts through, and cuts from, different textual, metatextual, and hypertextual realities and in doing so 2) disrupts the autonomy and discrete embodiments of Enlightenment subjectivity and 3) explores new I-We relationalities across time and space. I believe that King leaves open a tiny crack in his paratext. Water will slip me in.

### 2.2 Going to the Water

“Okay, says Coyote, if you say so. But where did all the water come from?” (King 469).

“I says. ‘Sit down and listen’” (253). “When that River starts flowing again, it flows real fast. It flows around those rocks, and it flows past those trees […] La, la, la, la, says that River, and it keeps going faster and faster. And pretty soon it is going very fast. It goes so fast, it goes right off the edge of the world” (255-6).

MF: Floated in and out.

**TK:** Floated in and out. Although those two guys gloated in and out […] I’m not

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\(^{19}\) See Constance Post’s Essay, “Old World Order in the New: John Eliot and ‘Praying Indians’ in Cotton Mather’s Magnalia Christi Americana” for a demonstration of how the idea of an “Indian Wilderness” played a foundational role in shaping the social imaginary of a nascent United Sates.

\(^{20}\) As Deloria notes, “Science and philosophy simply copied the institutional paths already taken by Western religion and mystified themselves so that one of the maxims of recent Western civilization has been to declare something to be ‘academic’” (*Red Earth, White Lies* 17).
sure but I think—Lueders is listed as the Chair of my committee on the final Ph.D. dissertation [...] I mean, I think it's a reasonably poor dissertation. (Fee and Gunew)

TK: I've always said that *Green Grass* probably more than my thesis was my dissertation.

JA: I can believe that.” (Andrews 168).

TK: [...] I'm working with the idea that we do nothing about the kind of 'wastes' that we create in the world [...] As long as we continue to do this our metaphorical toilets are going to back up (182).

Coyote: “Hmmmm [...] All this water imagery must mean something” (King 391).

“One of these days we’re going to open the floodgates, the water is going to pour down the channels, the generators are going to start” (King 156).

“What happens when it breaks?” (157).

“It’s not going to break, Eli. Just think of the dam as part of the landscape.” (148)

“hey they think the earth is moving under the dam” (149).

“Watch the toilet,” Latisa called after her. “Sometimes it overflows.”

“Don't they all,” Jeanette called back, sounding very far away. “Don't they all” (148).

First things first: water does not care about dams. Water rains, flows, freezes, pools, stinks, giggles (255), talks (432), rocks (389), calms down (390), and so on and so forth. Some
theorists will dismiss the embodiment of water with the same condescension that Henry Dawes showed toward Plains Indian Ledger art. “To speak thus is to use the aesthetic as an anesthetic” (Morton 10), they will say; “To theorize ecological views is also to bring thinking up to date” (Morton 10, emphasis mine). Digging their heels further into secularist quicksand, they will chant “Nature, a transcendental term in a material mask […] Nature. A metonymic series becomes a metaphor […] Nature wavers in between the divine and the material” (14). Strange, that. Why reinstall tired old binaries in the name of tearing them down? Even though these critics can be penetrating in their diagnosis of “nature” (namely, that it furnished a “new secular church” for romanticism) their unreflexive regurgitation of secular dogma (transcendent/metaphoric/not-yet-arrived vs material/metonymic/up-to-date) leads them to a particularly regressive brand of historicization, the progress narrative (23).

And how incredulous we should all be of progress by now! Throw technology, instrumentalism and institutional brawn into the mix, and one gets an even scarier beast, developmentalism. The modern megadam is its highest achievement; as Rob Nixon says, “big dams are (beyond any possible utility) a kind of national performance art” (156). America, it must be noted, played a historic role in pioneering megadams as well as in opposing them: “John Muir, Edward Abbey, Wallace Stegner, and David Brower […] All these writers […] lived in the […] American West and all were associated primarily with a wilderness ethic” (155). Romanticist engineering faced off against romanticist conservationism, and the “Indian,” once again, had no place in either camp. The dam becomes a monumental materialization of a tight semiotic knot that ties naturalized history (one that fossilizes the Indian inside the strata of national history) to historicized nature (one that inscribes and reinscribes the Enlightenment
subject into the natural world) and precludes all Indigenous land relations, which precludes all Indigenous storytelling, which precludes all Indigeneity.  

Thus, all things point to the dam in Green Grass. The four storytellers journey from Florida to Alberta to be with Eli at the moment when the dam fails. Their stories too, reference their way towards the dam, first in First Woman’s partner, Ahdamn, then in Moby Jane the whale (which alludes to the dam’s name, the Grand Baleen Dam, which again references out to a non-fictional dam in Quebec built on Cree land), then in successive figurations of water that become increasingly personified and agentive.

As if mirroring the growing agentivity of water in Volumes 3 and 4, Eli, the sole person responsible for the halting the dam’s operation (which seems to have less to do with his own intentions and more to do with the way in which all the worlds are closing in on the dam), loses his. Volumes 3 and 4 narrate Eli’s past decision not to return home as he inexplicably begins to reconnect with old friends and family in the present timeline. Eli’s process of reconnection reaches its apogee at the Sun Dance, where/when all of the novel’s Blackfoot characters (save for Charlie), the four storytellers, and Coyote all converge on the symbolic and spatial “center” which grounds as much as it sets adrift: “Below in the distance, a great circle of tepees floated on the prairies, looking for all the world like sailing ships adrift on the ocean” (402). The land behaves like water, clearing up any possible confusion over how Indigenous land relations relate to water relations. Out of water emerges land (39) and digging through land leads to water (386); the I-We gestationality of the two dissolves the geographer’s riddle, “is water bound by land or is

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21 For a powerful explanation of how Enlightenment subjectivity structures natural science (specifically geology) and in doing so renders black bodies fungible, see A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None (2018) by Kathryn Yusoff.
land bound by water?” Like metaphor and metonymy, like transcendence and immanence, land and water always—already birth each other. Eli proceeds to circle around the camp (405, 414), pulled along by his relations, until he intervenes in an altercation between Latisha and her estranged American husband George, who has come to photograph the Sun Dance. Even then Eli plays more of a facilitative role for his nephew Lionel, who will say the magic words that will mark his renewal to the four storytellers. Lionel says to the interloper, “There’s nothing for you here” (427), and by that time Eli has left without a word to make his way towards the dance.

Like Smith, I conclude my analysis with Eli because I believe that the unwitting destroyer of Grand Baleen dam might have something interesting to say for himself. He clearly signals that the meaning of his storyline is structured by what he hasn’t said, when he says to Lionel “Can’t just tell you that straight out. Wouldn’t make any sense. Wouldn’t be much of a story” (400). Though he has a clear understanding of the narrative that he had previously fallen into, the narrative of the “Indian who couldn’t go home” (317), he can’t explain to himself, or to others, why he decided to return to the reservation to live in the old home his mother had built. He has nothing to say about his motivation for fighting the operators of the dam either, though he does admit that he’s developed a perverse appreciation for the routine (or shall we say ritual) of refusing Sifton, the company representative. Smith, who’s methodology locks him out of the interiority of Eli’s self-mystification, zooms out to the interpretive community beyond the text for answers. From his vantage point, Eli’s character exists to serve. His silence and his death invites readers to “construct their own meaning […] As readers of a ‘performative ’postmodern trickster tale we are indeed invited to participate” (Smith 531). Eli understands that “telling the story requires other stories, perhaps even stories that go beyond him” (Smith 529), so he remains silent and waits for the surging floodwaters take him away. It's a depressing story. The “Indian
that left the reservation” has ossified into the “stoic Indian” whose death invites further symbolic extraction by readers hungry for meaning. The next dam that goes up on Indigenous land will be bigger, shinier, and more earthquake resistant. History marches on.

But not so quick. What do we make of the fact that “I” and Eli never coincide in the same scene? Why does Alberta never meet the four “old Indians,” when so many others do (429)? Here the crafty storyteller, the one that lives outside the novel, seems to have planted a clue, since earlier we discovered a logic of discrete embodiment in the narratives of the four storytellers, one where the embodied integrity of the storyteller remains sacrosanct for the duration of their performance. That logic dictated that “there is only one Thought Woman” within Thought Woman’s story, meaning that there is only one embodied storyteller, no matter the multiplicity of Indigenous knowledges and traditions represented by Thought Woman (302). Now we might add a second rule, one where the “master” embodiment of the storyteller and the “sub”-embodiment(s) of the storyteller cannot coincide in the same space-time. It must be clarified that both rules are rules that exist for the intelligibility of this-world only, where discrete embodiments and exclusionary syntax matter for the purposes of thought formation—thought that then reproduces the world as same, shot through with “master” versus “sub-” and inside versus outside relations. Earlier we found out that Alberta could very well be the “master” storyteller that had summoned Lone Ranger, Ishmael, Robinson Crusoe, and Hawkeye, so it makes sense that their paths never intersect in Blossom, Alberta. This causative logic means one thing for Eli, who’s wry, ironic voice sometimes sounds suspiciously similar to that of “I.” Of course, on the this-worldly narrative plane, there always exists the highly reasonable explanation that people don’t cross paths because their paths simply don’t cross, end of story. Given that choice and given the other, with no convincing reason to not choose otherwise, I choose the
Other. I choose to believe in a continuity/contiguity that links together Thomas King, the literature professor, writer, and activist, the “I” that brings all of the stories into existence, and Eli, the literature professor turned dam saboteur who makes possible the “main event” of the novel (aside from the initial main event of “So.”).

A new world reveals itself, where “I” tells the story of Eli (among others), and King tells the story of them both. At the same time, Eli tells the story of King writing _Green Grass_, who wants his stories to reveal just the right things to just the right people. Because names can _mean_, we can’t forget that Eli’s name already tells its own story, with its reference to the Biblical Elijah, who confronts the king Ahab and brings the rain. Take another step back and here _I_ am, purportedly conjuring a new story by writing about all three. Who’s telling the story of whom? It’s best not to ask such questions or we’ll be here forever. The most important moral of this particular story, probably, is this: I believe we have all the power, and no power at all. The same Eli that that culture and history has condemned to die in an earthquake related flood is the same Eli whose actions make possible the story that “I” tells. Likewise, the same Alberta whose history lesson has unintentionally doomed Indigenous consciousness to a perpetual loop of misnaming is the Alberta that has gestated Indigenous futurity. What we do in this world has incomprehensible importance even when it doesn’t matter at all. Like Eli basking in the sun with Coyote and the storytellers, we might find that water is already coming for us.

So. This thesis just might have found a way to retrieve ritual from the Western history of religion, where ritual, for too long, had been humanized, whether as formal practice or praxis. Take the enlightenment subject out of the formula, and a new kind of ritual surfaces, one that people might participate in without their knowing. This new perspective on ritual allows for
expanding, interconnected associations and thematizations. Weather patterns can be said to unfold ritualistically; changing climatological rituals can be said to affect the mating rituals of birds. Once again, Indigenous Studies proves itself to be ahead of the game, for it was Deloria that already explained that “In the religious world of most tribes, birds, animals, and plants compose the ‘other peoples’ of creation. Depending on the ceremony, various of these ‘peoples’ participate in human activities” (278). The sacredness of the land and its inhabitants “does not depend on human occupancy but on the stories that describe the revelation that enabled human beings to experience the holiness there” (278). Land based conceptions of sacredness and ritual add an interesting twist to Nixon’s idea of environmental “slow violence.” For many Indigenous tribes, environmental degradation and spiritual degradation represent two sides of the same coin. A secularizing environment that makes the land uninhabitable for Indigenous consciousness and spirituality could narrate the slowest of all slow violences: one that arguably began with the Pope signing over the so-called New World to Spain in 1493 and continues on to this day with governmental refusal to recognize Indigenous rituals, ceremonies, customs and ways of life.

Vizenor might be right in the end; there is nothing left to do but tell more stories. Two constants thread their way through all figurations of storytelling ritual. First is the relationality inherent to ritual as an intermediary, performative medium. Through ritual, I begins to relate to a We that always-already gestates an I. Second is the storiedness of ritual, a characteristic that owes itself to the structure of ritual as an I-We performative-interpretive of aporetic agentivity. Regardless of its ending, story always brings itself back to the storyteller, who in the end is left with the fragments and residue of their own thoughts. So the best kind of postsecular critique, one that minds its relations, might be one that just tries to be like water. It is known that the Cherokee dida:hnese:sgi, the “putter-in-and-drawer-out of them” (Kilpatrick 25), have the ability
to bring dead ritual texts back to life through certain “Going to the Water” purification rights (xviii). The embodied Eli, the dead text that couldn’t tell its own story, arguably goes back to the water to surpass the confines of “nature” and “history.” Non-Indigenous postsecular critique professes far less ambitious aims. With the acknowledgment that it may, at any moment, veer into the kind of “Yuppie shamanism” that King abhors (“Godzilla vs Post-Colonial” 188), it humbles itself, and does its best to responsibly “put in” as much as it “draws out.” That way, the (pre-/post-/supra-/inter-/intra-)symbolic river continues to flow, and a people without history are also a people with an inviolate (his/her/their/…)story. That way, there is water everywhere.
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