

## **Status, Mixedbloods, and Community in Thomas King's *Medicine River***

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Some critics of Thomas King's first novel, *Medicine River* (1989), have referred to it as "Seinfeld on the Rez." The basic premise of the American comedy *Seinfeld* is that it is a show about nothing, as its creators have maintained. By contrast, *Medicine River* is a complex, intricately woven story about belonging and coming home, intertwined with authorial commentary about issues relating specifically to the First Nations people in Canada: social status, intermarriage, and the function of community. This article seeks to investigate how these three issues are treated in the novel, focusing on questions such as how mixedbloods fit into either Indian or white culture; and the function of community in the life of the indigenous people.

### **The Indian Act and the Question of Status**

The critic Louis Owens has called the dominant theme in novels by Indian authors "the dilemma of the mixedblood, the liminal 'breed' seemingly trapped between Indian and white worlds" (40). By Canadian law, Will, the protagonist in *Medicine River*, is considered "stateless." The Indian Act (which determines his status) governs the life of 350,000 Canadian Indians as well as more than 2,000 reserves in that country. The regulations of this act explain why, in spite of his father's death, Will, his brother and mother are prevented from living on the reserve when they return to Medicine River. His mother, Rose Horse Capture, had married a white man, and thus her legal status as an Indian could not be regained. Had Rose Horse Capture been a man and married to a white woman, not only would he not have lost his status, but his white wife and any children would have had Indian status conferred upon them—a result of the patriarchal lineage system being instilled by the Indian Act. A person can be of mixed race and still hold his or her status as an Indian, as long as the Indian blood derives from his father's side.

Will thinks himself as nothing else but an Indian; many of his relatives, on the other hand, believe otherwise. Early on in the novel, his brother James asks if they are going back to the reserve. Maybe, Will replies to him, but his cousin Maxwell tells him otherwise:

"No . . . you can't. You guys have to live in town 'cause you're not Indian anymore."

"Sure we are," I [Will] said. "Same as you."

"Your mother married a white."

"Our father's dead."

"Doesn't matter." (King 9)

Will knows his father was white, but he identifies himself as Indian, and despite his parentage, no one else on the reserve is prepared to challenge this. Nonetheless, Will is still made to suffer as a result of restrictive government legislation, as his father suggested in a letter written to his mother: “Sorry you had to leave the reserve, but Calgary’s a better place for a swell girl like you. Stupid rule, anyway,” (King 4). King makes only one other reference to the peculiarities of the non-status Indian. When Will has moved back to Medicine River after the death of his mother, his friend Harlen Bigbear takes him around to different banks to get a loan to open a photography studio. Will’s first stop, the DIA (Department of Indian Affairs), brings him no luck. “Whitney Oldcrow shook his head and explained to Harlen that his office couldn’t make loans to non-status Indians, that he was sorry, but that was the way it was” (99).

### **The Role of the Mixedblood in the Community**

Does being a mixedblood or a non-status Indian have an effect on one’s social status? Earlier Native American writers have already addressed this problem, as Mourning Dove did, for example, in *Cogewea, the Half-Blood* (1927). Then in the 1970s came Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony* (1977); and in the 1980s Janet Campbell Hale’s *The Jailing of Cecelia Capture* (1985), and Momaday’s *The Ancient Child* (1989). The problem has been further analyzed in the 1990s by the “second generation” of Native American writers such as Louis Owens in *The Sharpest Sight* (1992) and *Bone Game* (1994); and Susan Power in *The Grass Dancer* (1995). In *Medicine River*, the question “Are you Indian or are you white?” is a non-issue for Will. His mother’s family is referred to by name, while his white father remains nameless, suggesting that Will’s “white side” is unimportant. Yet King never reveals Will’s full name: he is always characterized as Rose Horse Capture’s son. This lends further credence to the argument that he is an Indian. Other than his father, Will’s married girlfriend in Toronto, and his mother’s friend Erleen, his contact with white people on a personal level is minimal—especially after he moves back to Medicine River. Will is totally abandoning that “white” part of his life, and accepting his role as a part of the Medicine River community.

He does not appear to have the problems experienced by mixedbloods in other novels, such as Jim Loney in James Welch’s *The Death of Jim Loney* (1979). Loney, like Will, is a mixedblood Indian, whose mother was an Indian and his father a white person. Unlike Will, who has the advantage of being raised by a strong Indian mother, Loney is deserted by both parents, who do not stay long enough to give him a solid sense of identity.

Like Will, Loney has a white lover—Rhea—who would do anything to save him from the self-destructive path he has chosen. Unfortunately she does not understand how the two cultures conflict in his mind—at one point, she observes that he is “so lucky to have two sets of ancestors. Just think, you can be Indian one day and white the next. Whichever suits you” (14). By contrast, Will in *Medicine River* has the support of the Indian community to help him throughout life. He is never sure who his father is, or what role he would have played in Will’s life had he remained a part of it. To compensate for this, Will makes up stories about his father, which he himself wants to believe. Although Will insists that he “didn’t miss him . . . didn’t even think about him . . . had never known the man” (King 80), his preoccupation with such stories tells the reader otherwise. Even if he didn’t “miss the man,” he has missed the experience of having a father. Hence the propensity for telling stories, such as the fact that

“[he] was always getting postcards and letters with pictures of him standing against some famous place or helping women and children take sacks of rice off the back of trucks” (King 84). The closest Will comes to his father in his adult life is the picture that his mother sent to him one birthday.

The members of his community are reluctant to provide any further information—they tell certain anecdotes and then drop the subject. Even Rose is ambiguous about his identity: “Each time my mother told her stories, they got larger and better. Sometimes, it was Howard. Sometimes, it was Martin. Sometimes, it was Eldon. But she never used my father’s name” (King 128).

When Clyde Whiteman gets out of jail the first time and is reunited with the basketball team, Harlen encourages Will to talk with him, to “help keep him out of trouble.” Harlen wants Will to talk “like a father” (King 122); but Will does not know how to do this. Instead he recounts yet another story, in which his father is not described by name.

Will’s cultural confusion is also apparent in the fact that while his mother and brother choose to return permanently to Medicine River, he finds work in Toronto. He leads a simple, obscure, relatively isolated life until his mother dies.

It is only after the death of his mother, which prompts his decision to return to Medicine River, that he decides to rediscover his Indian roots by returning to Medicine River. To his friend Harlen, Will is a Blood and as such belongs near the reserve: “Bertha says you got a lot of relatives on the reserve,” Harlen tells Will (King 94). It is Harlen who hands out Will’s business cards to attract clients, Harlen who convinces him to join the basketball team, and Harlen who—although a trickster—provides the opportunity for Will to become a part of Medicine River, where he belongs.

### **The Importance of Community and Belonging**

“Central to Native American storytelling . . . is the construction of a reality that begins, always, with the land” (Owens 193). The town of Medicine River and the surrounding reserve is central to the lives of all of the characters, as is the surrounding reserve and the mountains. Harlen tells Will that they have “got the Rockies, too. You see over there . . . Ninastiko—Chief Mountain. That’s how we know where we are. When we can see the mountain, we know we’re home” (King 93). Despite the years spent in Toronto, Will is a Blood and Medicine River is his home.

In *Medicine River*, the concept of family embraces an entire community, as opposed to the white (or European) conception of the nuclear family. Harlen, again, is at the center of things, explaining to Will that agreeing to take a family portrait for Joyce Blue Horn involves an entirely different concept:

“Joyce is Mary Rabbit’s daughter. She married Elvis Blue Horn. They got eleven kids.”

Harlen’s eyes were squeezed down into two smiling slits. “Will, when Joyce Blue Horn said family, she wasn’t just talking about her and Elvis and the kids, you know . . . Elvis has nine brothers and four sisters.”

“Come on, Harlen.”

“And Joyce,” said Harlen, trying to keep from laughing out loud, “Joyce has seven sisters and five brothers.”

“The photo special is for immediate family.”

Harlen wiped his eyes with his shirt sleeve. “Oh,” he said, “then we’re only talking about fifty people or so.” (King 205).

Harlen tells Will that “maybe you should greet everyone, so you know the people” (King 208), once again ensuring that Will becomes a part of Medicine River.

This community is a tight-knot community—everyone knows everyone else, and is aware of individual family trees: “Big John Yellow Rabbit was Evelyn First runner’s blood nephew. Her father had married Rachael Weaselhead, which made Harley Weaselhead Big John’s great-grandfather on his grandmother’s side, which meant that Eddie Weaselhead, whose grandfather was Rachel’s brother, was blood kin to Big John.

Evelyn’s sister, Doreen, had married Fred Yellow Rabbit just long enough to produce Big John before Fred went off to a rodeo in Saskatoon and disappeared. Doreen married Moses Hardy from Hobbema, who wasn’t related to anyone at Standoff, but that doesn’t have anything to do with the trouble (King 53).

Part of what holds the community together is the Friendship Centre; another is the basketball team, the Warriors. Harlen recruits Will for the team, even though Will insists that he is not good at the game. Harlen talks about the importance of the team, and by implication, the community as well: “[the] team gives the boys something to belong to, something they can be proud of. You give the boys confidence, Will. They got respect for you, and we got a good team” (23). The people of Medicine River demonstrate their care and concern for each other in other ways as well. When January Pretty Weasel shoots and kills her husband, then writes a suicide note to make it look otherwise, the community bonds together. Everyone knows that Jake physically abused January on more than one occasion. Will recalled a time that Jake hit January after a basketball game, “right in the face with his fist. It was the only time I ever saw Jake hit January, but Betty down at the hospital said that January was a regular in the emergency ward. Betty told January to file charges, but she never did” (45).

Rather than face the reality of the situation—that January fired the gun and penned the 10-page suicide note—and see January go to jail for what appeared to be a justified killing, Harlen and Will and the rest of Medicine River eventually decide that “Jake probably shot himself maybe because he hated himself for beating on January or because he was angry at the time and didn’t have anyone but himself to hit” (King 51). The result, however, is that instead of relying on hard evidence, the people of Medicine River decide that justice has already been done; they remember Jake through the things he “said” about January and the children in the suicide note.

Greg Sarris asserts that

storytelling is a fundamental aspect of culture, and stories are used in a number of ways and for a multitude of purposes. Stories can work as cultural indexes for appropriate or inappropriate behavior. They can work to oppress or to liberate, to confuse or enlighten. (4)

*Medicine River* is an example of stories being used to liberate. This is evident in January's case; and, more significantly, in Will's. The community provides him with this liberation

through its stories not only of Will's father, but of his past, of Harlen's past, of feuding friends brought together again, of the basketball championships.

Had he remained in Toronto, Will, like the nameless narrator of Welch's *Winter in the Blood*, could have presented "a stark image of a contemporary Native American cut off from much of what could sustain and enrich him" (Ruppert 56). By contrast, Will finds his vocation in life and in the process finds the sustenance and enrichment that he needs in the community of Medicine River, in the shadow of Ninastiko. He is home.

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