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***Narrative Resistance: Native American
 Collaborative Autobiography***

Kathleen M. Sands

Twenty-four years ago, driving the two lane highway from Tucson to Sells, Arizona, site of the tribal headquarters of the Tohono O'odham Indian nation,¹ I hummed with anticipation, eager to begin my first fieldwork project. The road cutting across the Papagueria desert was lonesome. Only lavender ironwood blossoms and splashes of yellow paloverde flowers and blue lupin colored the grey-green monotone of boulders, cacti, and jagged peaks. The air was soft, the desert familiar and promising. And I was ready—so I thought—to solicit a comprehensive personal narrative from an Tohono O'odham man. With his agreement, the project would culminate in a book-length collaborative autobiography. And I had reason to believe he would agree, if for no other reason than that he was trapped in a full body cast as a result of being hit by a car. I knew from a friend of his, one of my professors, that he was thoroughly bored with the routine of the tribal hospital and would welcome a diversion, especially if it gave him an opportunity to tell his life story.

Though we'd never met, Theodore Rios was not a stranger. I'd read a series of transcripts of interviews with Rios, collected by an anthropologist and archived at the University of Arizona where I was completing my doctoral work.² I knew a version of Ted's life story; I carried his distinctive voice in my head. I knew he could tell a story—"a good one"—as he often later characterized the incidents and events he narrated. I'd been studying Papago language and culture, and I'd nearly memorized the Maria Chona/Ruth Underhill *Papago Woman* collaborative autobiography text which had generated my interest in Papago culture and has been the focus of a great deal of critical scholarship since the 1970s.

As I rumbled across the cattle guard at the entrance to the tribal hospital, the vibration it generated in my beat-up Rambler station wagon was indistinguishable from the flutter my nerves produced. The confi-

dence of the open road gave way to a sense of panic. In a rumbling, clattering instant, I realized I was crazy to assume that I could mediate the telling of a Native life. I recognized that I didn't begin to know enough to even make a proper beginning, let alone see the project through to publication. I was right on both counts. That cattle guard shook some sense into me, but of course, I'd gone too far to turn back. I parked and walked into the shade of the hospital and into the responsibility of inscribing a life that both haunts and drives my work even today.

Ted agreed to the project and we started working together, neither of us initially negotiating how the project would work. We simply signed a letter of intent regarding publication rights—co-authorship—and began a conversation that went on regularly for months and intermittently for years. Inexperienced and nervous, I started out asking far too many questions, hardly allowing him a chance to answer. He forced me to slow down, often ignoring my questions and telling his life his way. When he was released from the hospital, we continued to meet regularly at his home, a short walk from the mission at San Xavier. He slowly recovered, we made a film together,³ I finished my degree and moved to Phoenix, he ended up in a rest home not far from where I was living, I published an article on his sense of multiple audience,⁴ he went back to San Xavier, and the stories stopped when he died. He gained a little local fame from the work and film and article, but the book, it didn't happen, not in time for Ted. The failure is entirely mine. Ted told "a good one." I just didn't know how to get it from tape to print, and I'm not sure I do even now, after twenty years of study and scholarly writing about Native American collaborative autobiography. When I began, I knew too little; now, perhaps I know too much. Both conditions are paralyzing.⁵ But I'm beginning to see Ted's story as a way to examine the process of collaborative personal narrative. The unfinished work we did together, taken in the context of the history of critical work on ethnographic and literary personal narratives, may offer a way to open up to critical scrutiny the process of the transformation of narrated life to inscribed text. Ted's story may be "a good one" for initiating a more useful and honest way to think about, talk about, and write about the negotiation of two separate individuals from two separate cultures who have separately conceived ideas about the intention and the value of the encounter they work to transform into cross-cultural inscription.

What I've just done is the oldest trick going for establishing the credibility and "authority" of the collector/editor of Native American collaborative autobiography. It's a convention of the "genre,"⁶ one of its

worst, since through modesty and expressions of care and concern and a heavy dose of personal background, it usurps the power of the Native narrator and places the credentials of collector/editor as the singular criteria for the "authenticity"⁷ and value of the inscribed narrative. The twist—at least I certainly hope this rather painful self-revelation is not simply another example of conventional strategies—is that the project I've just introduced is a twenty-three year failure: my failure. The credentials are honest, but the claim to authority is false. If I had felt authoritative—a false and hegemonic concept to begin with—about completing this work, it would have been in print years ago. Instead, I've packed the transcripts of the sessions with Ted from Phoenix to Oregon and back, to Greece and Portugal. The burden has not grown lighter with time.

However, the last two decades have not been entirely wasted where the Rios narrative is concerned. I've studied ethnographic autobiographies, literary autobiographies, theory of autobiography and ethnography, postmodern theory, oral tradition ethno-poetics, the new ethnography, and I know much more today than I did when I crossed that cattle guard at Sells. Despite becoming more educated on the subject, essentially what I've accumulated in two decades—besides quite a case of guilt—is a lot of questions, a vocabulary that is still inadequate to the task, a high level of discomforting self-consciousness, and a growing recognition that failure is, indeed, a tough teacher. But maybe it is also a beginning point for attempting a new way of inscribing a collaborative autobiography project, one that acknowledges degrees and impacts of cultural difference and reveals the complexities of the field experience and the transformation of that sometimes cooperative, sometimes resistant process into a written text. Am I ready to finish the Rios project? I think so. But that's another story.⁸

What I want to do here is use my experience of failure with the Rios narrative as a point of departure from which to examine some of the techniques, strategies, terminology, conventions, theories, and critical assumptions that act as impediments to comprehension of the process of Native American collaborative personal narrative. My intention is not to denigrate the work that has been done in this field; great breakthroughs have been made in the century since Native life stories began to be inscribed, especially in the last decade. But as I read new published texts and critical works on this topic, my concern grows that Native American collaborative narratives are being misinterpreted, that reductive theoretical paradigms are being applied to extremely complex literary productions. Maybe because I've been in the field, I'm not satisfied with purely textual

analysis. Maybe because I've been there, I believe Native American personal narratives are not, as they have been characterized recently, examples of colonialism.⁹ I believe, in fact, that they are acts of narrative resistance.

I use the term resistance in a very specific sense. I do not want to suggest that Native narrators of their lives resist the collaborative relationship or that they use the narrative process as a deliberately subversive venue. Though I can certainly cite examples of what I think are subversive texts—Geronimo's, for instance—I believe Native American collaborative autobiographies are not usually so overtly politically charged. Rather, I see narrative resistance as an inevitable but rarely examined outcome of the personal cross-cultural exchange. As David Moore points out, "A dialogic system generates interactions, *oppositions* [emphasis mine], and alliances . . ." (19). Thus I introduce the term resistance in order to name what I see as an inherent part of the dialogic that occurs between collector/editor and narrator in Native American collaborative autobiography. Further, I see resistance in the collaborative process as most clearly articulated and available in the areas of Native linguistics and cultural aesthetics. Native narrators resist the conventions and language of Euro-American autobiography. Their Indian voices persist even in the most oppressive collaborative works.¹⁰

That is not to say that I don't recognize colonialism as a significant factor in the collection and publication of Native American personal narratives.¹¹ Collaborative autobiographies are never ahistorical; they are the product of their times, the Native narrator's experience and memory, and the conventions of the collector/editor's discipline at a particular moment. Many, even those recently published, are clearly situated in what James Clifford calls the salvage mode ("Allegory" 113). They're intended to provide "self-narrated" records of representative individual lives in what were assumed to be vanishing tribes. These collaborative narratives clearly fall within the perimeters of the larger U.S. policy of dominance over Native peoples. In effect, they objectify Native narrators by inscribing them as representatives of dying cultures or aspects of traditional cultures. In them, the dynamics of culture change and survival, both pre-encounter and that affected by tribal encounters with Euro-American culture, are often ignored in favor of narratives that focus exclusively on traditional life ways. They are, despite the conventional use of present tense in their presentation, framed in the elegiac mode.

Addressing salvage ethnography as it impacts the processes and products of collaborative inscriptions is important and useful. Helen Carr's recent analysis of *Papago Woman*—to remain temporarily

consistent in terms of looking at O'odham literary production—for instance, historicizes the relationship of Ruth Underhill and Maria Chona by demonstrating the dominance of Underhill's salvage agenda in the text originally published in the 1930s. She notes that this "text embodies the period's primitivist critique of modern life," pointing out that the text "stresses the Papago's sensitivity to natural rhythms, and the calm peaceful tempo of their lives." She states, "Underhill has chosen to emphasise [sic] the rituals and harmonies of Chona's life. Relations with government officials, references to the support the Papago gave to the US against the Apache, the eventual establishment of the reservation—all which must have been part of Chona's experience—never appear" (245–46). In sum, Carr notes, "the central oppressive power in Chona's life," Euro-Americans, is absent in the text (249). Carr demonstrates that post-colonial theory allows the critic to uncover the allegory of salvage inscription. By foregrounding colonial relations between Underhill and Chona, Carr emphasizes cultural difference, an important element of collaborative personal narratives, but the analysis of difference is lopsided. Focus on the collector/editor, which most criticism of collaborative autobiography does, presumes that the collector, as participant in a dominant culture's ideology, controls the text. Thus critics often miss the power of Native narrators to use the collaborative process to express difference, to use the narrative events to their own ends, and in some cases, to actively resist the collector's cultural and ideological agenda.

Until recently, I, like Carr, have focused on omissions in collaborative Native American narratives—and in their methodological introductions—believing them critical to uncovering the collection and editorial processes that shape inscription. What isn't addressed in texts has seemed to me at least as valuable as what appears in print. The unspoken, or at least unscribed, ideologies and attitudes that mold written texts have offered evidence for editorial manipulation. I've been reading Native autobiographies as what James Clifford calls "fictions" ("Introduction" 5–7), not in the sense of false, but as made things, in this case monologues made from dialogues, *partial* representations of lived encounters and piecemeal narratives which are "multi-subjective" and "power-laden" ("Introduction" 15). I have wanted to know all the parts—and still do. I long ago lost faith in the verifiability and reliability of any personal narrative and shifted my critical strategy to the postmodern focus on subjectivity. Like most scholars in the field, I began analyzing both ideological and disciplinary biases imbedded in the editorial decisions and statements of collectors as a means of opening up subject position in the narrated text.

The advantage of that strategy has become embarrassingly clear to me as I consider both my own work and the work of such critics as Arnold Krupat, David Brumble, Hertha D. Sweet Wong, Helen Carr and others in light of my role as a non-Native scholar. Consciously or unconsciously, I think we have all assumed that the collector/editor is the key to unlocking these cross-cultural autobiographical texts because we assume he or she possesses the exclusive power to control the narrative presentation. The new ethnography has made it very clear to literary critics that how what goes on in the field is inscribed by the fieldworker is not only fair game, but appropriate game for the scholar. As critics, empowering ourselves to interpret collaborative personal narratives, we also identify with collector editors even when we are most critical of their techniques in presenting orally narrated lives. We are most comfortable analyzing text produced by scholars like ourselves. We know our academic disciplines and the changing theoretical models that influence the collection and publication of such texts. We understand the monologic—monolithic—nature of the published autobiographical text.¹²

And if we are dissatisfied with the absence of full reports of field methodology, of editorial practices, and of dialogic representation, we can excuse our limited critical insight on the basis of inadequate information by citing Clifford's statements about the partial nature of cross-cultural representations ("Introduction" 7). We fall back on the "classical dichotomies of Self and Other, Subject and Object, the West and the Rest," but as Ruth Behar points out, these oppositional paradigms "have become hopelessly inadequate in the face of feminist and minority cultural critiques, the growing strength of various forms of 'native' anthropology, and the increasing borderization of our world" (165).

Notwithstanding the above criticism, we've done good work—recovered and brought important narrative texts into the critical arena, developed useful techniques for penetrating certain elements of collaborative texts, analyzed the history of the genre in its disciplinary and political contexts, and succeeded in moving some Native American collaborative autobiographies into the literary curriculum. But what our emphasis on the collector/editor has not done is adequately focus on the negotiation of text by two people in a collaborative partnership. We don't really comprehend Native poetics and politics. We've placed so much of our attention on the published text and the history of the disciplines that have produced them and so little on ethnographic and historical data, on tribal oral traditions and their performance aesthetics, on tribal language systems, and on actually doing the kind of fieldwork that leads to personal narrative inscription, that we have limited ourselves to reading Native

American collaborative autobiography almost exclusively in terms of Euro-American political and literary theories.¹³ We privilege the collector/editor's power because it is our own power. We presume that because collector/editors are members of the dominant culture, the power relationship in the collaborative process is unidirectional. What we don't recognize, or at least don't write about, is Native power because it is Other. We are ill-equipped to critically examine the evidence of difference in Native narration. It resists us.

The one critic thus far who looks directly at collaborative personal narrative as culturally resistant text writes, I think significantly, from a Native American perspective and himself resists the didactic deadpan of scholarly text. Greg Sarris, in his analysis of Elizabeth Colson's *Autobiographies of Three Pomo Women*, is in a unique position as a mixed-blood Pomo to recognize the resistance strategies at work in this text. He knows Pomo storytelling first hand, and proves it by narrating several stories in the course of his critical essay. He begins his essay with a personal narrative, quoting tribal women elders' admonitions about talking to outsiders: "Careful what you tell." "Don't talk much with outside people" (82). Then he explains, "When the professors visited each summer, Nettie became silent. Eleanor gave short flat answers and told stories no one in the house had ever heard" (82).¹⁴ Given this personal evidence, he suspects that the three Pomo women from whom Colson solicited narratives edited their stories as they told them—they resisted in the very act of cooperating. He speculates that they responded within the context of attitudes toward outsiders—"Rejection. Distrust. Anger. Hatred" (93)—that he has been taught characterize Pomo-White relations. But he is cautious. Early in the essay he admits that in addressing the three autobiographies, his "impulse as a critic was to say what was truly Pomo" so that he "could show what Colson missed, how ignorant she was as an outsider to Pomo culture." But he checks himself and asks, "But who am I to speak for and define the central Pomo or any Pomo?" (83). This question points to the collaborative nature of all Native texts. Each is in some measure communal in origin and on-going performance; each expresses cultural and individual sensibilities in varying degrees over time, and no single voice can claim authority to speak for some essential tribal way of experiencing and articulating culture.

Later in his essay, after examining Colson's statements of methodology, Sarris speaks as a scholar of collaborative Native autobiography and asks, "How do I deal with those fundamental questions, specifically those I raised about Colson and her biases? About the Indian women's biases and how the Indian women may have edited their spoken narratives for

Colson. . . . And what are my own biases, my position as a reader?" (87). The latter question directs his analysis of the Pomo women's texts toward linguistic patterns that would have influenced narrative style but which elude the non-Pomo reader. He notes that while Pomo English speakers of the late nineteenth century could not have replicated Pomo syntax in English, they likely would have adapted salient features of the language to their English narrations, such as "copious use of verbs" as a thematizing agency in English, which, he emphasizes, is a subject-oriented language (97–98). He illustrates his point by carefully examining the narratives, arguing that they retain linguistic features of the Pomo language in spite of Colson's clear admission of occasionally inverting and knocking into more "English shape" the sentences the women spoke (95). For instance, Sarris quotes Colson's lines, "Those boys made that thing. They were singing, singing, singing; and they were making some kind of feather basket with red feathers." He then juxtaposes this with what, on the basis of his linguistic study, he speculates would have been typical of unedited verb thematizing: "Singing, singing, singing, making thing, them boys. Singing and same time putting red feathers on. Singing and putting red feathers. Making thing with fist tail on, them boys" (95). Knowledge of—I would qualify that by saying about—the Native language is, he argues, essential for recognizing Native narrative resistance.

He also points to non-chronological narration as characteristic of the Pomo storytelling aesthetic. This feature, which is common to many tribal narrative styles, is almost always "corrected" by collector editors.¹⁵ However, in the field encounter, it is part of the narrator's literary control by means of which the relational character of both Native American literatures and cultures is affirmed. Sarris's point, and mine too, is that cultural and linguistic contexts inform the reading of even a highly edited text. His analysis of the Pomo narratives, while giving substantial attention to Colson's role in the collection and editing processes, places equal if not greater weight on Pomo culture and aesthetics. It emphasizes a balance of power in the collaborative production process and argues for much closer attention to the stylistic details of the body of the narrated text as it appears in print.

In making the point at the beginning of my discussion of the Sarris essay that his critical work in reclaiming the Colson text for the Native narrators is facilitated, perhaps initiated, by his membership in the Pomo community, I do not mean to suggest that non-Natives are not capable of effectively compiling Native American texts or writing criticism about them. Rather, I want to make the point that effective partnership in the

production of these texts and in insightful scholarly writing about them requires more than literary and theoretical know-how. It demands intensive study of oral traditions and linguistics which will aid the collector/editor in respecting and inscribing the tribal stylistics of the narration and enable the scholar to penetrate the printed text and examine the narrative in relation to specific tribal oral styles.¹⁶ As Paula Gunn Allen notes, critical study of Native American narrative requires examination of the Native critical principles on which the literature is based (personal communication).

The other important insight that the Sarris essay offers is attention to the positioning of the reader in relation to the text, overtly acknowledging the influence of the intentions and the knowledge the critic brings to interpreting a collaborative text. Though Sarris's self-reflexivity is not revolutionary, it demonstrates what I hope is a growing recognition that the text the critic inscribes is every bit as unstable as the autobiography under examination and that the tools and critical strategies we have brought to these texts over the past two decades are inadequate for examining Native narrative voices.

While resistance in a collaborative text may be elusive and require specialized knowledge or circumstances as in the Pomo autobiographies example, it is often overt, even under the most repressive circumstances. The oral traditions narrated in the autobiographical text may provide the means of comprehending the form and level of Native resistance, if we are sufficiently schooled in the tribal traditions to recognize their intention.

Geronimo's Story of His Life, recorded, edited and published in 1906 by S. M. Barrett, is a case in point. I have been puzzled for years that this text has not received critical attention except for one chapter in Arnold Krupat's study of Native American autobiography, *For Those Who Come After*. I suspect that most critics see this as such a "corrupt" text that they have avoided it. As Krupat sees the text, Barrett, by presenting Geronimo's life history in terms of the emergence of social science objectivism and salvage anthropology, refuses Geronimo "the context of heroism" or even "individuality." Barret, he notes, describes Geronimo as "no different from 'any captive,' any 'prisoner of war,' no world historical figure, but just another 'vanishing type'" (63). I do not argue with Krupat's evaluation of Barret's agenda; however, I believe it is a mistake to read this narrative exclusively in terms of Geronimo as a colonized victim of U.S. policy and the recorder/editor's social science theorizing. Again, emphasis on the collector/editor prevents a balanced reading. First, it ignores that under the most repressive circumstances, Geronimo

articulates clearly his terms for narrating—he refuses to answer questions or be interrupted in any way during his telling. Further, it ignores the narrator’s adaptation of Apache traditional literary conventions to his own experiences. Even cursory reading of the narrative reveals that Geronimo frames his life in relation to his tribe’s oral tradition, implicitly relating himself to the mythic heroes of his people. Given the circumstances of his imprisonment and Barrett’s social science approach to the project, Geronimo’s narrative strategy is not only cleverly resistant, it’s subversive, one suspects even tricksterish, a way of insuring that his life story will be incorporated into an enduring form of tribal oral storytelling. Geronimo thwarts Barrett’s imposition of demeaning “tragic” stereotype and employs what Gerald Vizenor calls a comic holotrope. Geronimo, if you pay attention to what he actually says in his narrative, is using a tribally affirming way of talking back to the dominant culture.

When traditional storytelling incorporated into collaborative text is recognized as a means of creating subjectivity, not only as a way of establishing tribal identity and narrative authenticity, the reader can begin to appreciate the control the narrator retains even in a highly edited, highly suspect text.

In the examples I’ve cited above, Sarris brings a great deal of specialized knowledge of Pomo culture and language to the text in order to uncover the resistance exerted by the narrator. Thus I see his work as a breakthrough that contrasts markedly with more conventional literary and theoretical scholarship that imposes theoretical models but does not examine how the narrator uses tribal language and aesthetics to resist being overpowered by Euro-American forms and intentions.

I’d like to turn now to what I see as another kind of breakthrough, one that offers a new model for the presentation of Native personal narrative and for the scholarly analysis of the collaborative process in a single volume that resists both autobiography and disciplinary conventions. In what I see as the best example of recent work in the genre, the partners in the collaboration deliberately incorporate multi-vocal self-reflections on the project into the volume they produce, allowing the reader a great deal more knowledge of the collaborative process than has heretofore been offered in published autobiography. In this volume, not only is the collector/editor self-reflexive, the Native collaborators articulate their perceptions of the process of narration and inscription. This book makes our work as critics nearly obsolete, except for pointing out the strategies used by the partners in the project.

Life Told Like a Story: Life Stories of Three Yukon Native Elders, narrated by Angela Sidney, Kitty Smith, and Annie Ned and edited by

Julie Cruikshank, is a remarkable example of shared power and balanced collaboration achieved by the active resistance of the narrators to the totalizing conventions the editor initially brings to the project. Oral tradition dominates this book, not just in the incorporation of traditional stories into the individual women’s stories, but because the women’s personal stories are told and presented in terms of the conventions, not of Euro-American literary autobiography, but of oral tradition in content and style. Since I have written at length on this book elsewhere,¹⁷ I won’t repeat extensive examples. Instead, let me enumerate the ways in which this volume resists Euro-American literary expectations.

First, the narrators resist chronological narration; their stories move almost seamlessly back and forth in time, interpreting historical and individual memory by means of tribal memory, demonstrating sophisticated integration of multiple tribal literary forms rarely seen in a published text.

Second, in these narratives, place is not allowed to function, as it does in many Native personal narratives, as symbolic setting; it is an immediate catalyst for contextualizing contemporary story in clan and tribal mythology; it is not simply the site of traditional life but the locus of contemporary experience. The collaborators literally take the collector/editor to the places that are both personally and tribally significant and teach her place names and stories by which to understand their personal experiences and narrations. Thus their tribal methodology is critical to the narrative process, as it has been and is in Native communities. Native cultural aesthetics and literary conventions shape the telling of personal experience in a way not common to Euro-American text.

Third, the narrators insist—and I use the term deliberately because Cruikshank resisted their resistance at first—upon being presented as other than individually autonomous. They narrate themselves as shaped by and shaping their communities and oral traditions. For instance, Smith incorporates lengthy remembered (read: reconstructed) conversations into her narration, thereby situating herself in community interactions and even as the topic of community conversation. Dialogue emphasizes kinship and relationality in terms of placement within the community social structure. This, of course, is directly antithetical to the privileging of individuality, of uniqueness, at the core of Euro-American autobiography; it suggests that subjectivity, like inscription of identity, is provisional. For these Native women subjectivity is not singular but inextricably connected to tribal myth, history and contemporary experience.

Fourth, the juxtapositioning of traditional speeches and song and stories with personal narration is a technique calling attention to the

interaction of texts. These narrated lives are inherently heteroglossic. Contemporary narrative speaks to and is resonant with oral tradition and historical narrative. Further, it is dialogic; voices of the past, dialogue from both past and present, and self-reflexive interpretation all share narrative space. Thus narrative in this volume is multiply resistant to monologic inscription, the conventional mode of Euro-American autobiography.

Combined with Cruikshank's very comprehensive methodological discussion, the inclusion of raw text in the volume, and the voices of the narrators directly discussing their intentions for the project, these collaborative autobiographies offer perhaps the most overtly resistant inscription of Native American lives to date. Not only the narrators but the collector/editor is resistant to the usual conventions of Indian autobiography. She consults with and negotiates the presentation of the narratives every step of the way. Tutored by her collaborators to understand that for them narrative is an analytical mode, she follows their lead by narrating her experiences with these three women and thus incorporating her interpretation of the narratives into her own text. At one point, she notes, "by imbuing place with meaning through story," the narrators "seemed to be using locations in physical space to talk about events in chronological time" (347). Her recognition of cultural difference at the most basic levels of phenomenological conceptualization leads the reader toward a recognition of the Native character of the narratives in the volume. Cruikshank is ultimately the best critic of the collaborative process that produced this volume. Between the narrators and Cruikshank, all the intertextuality that usually has to be provided by the scholarly critic is already present.

Cultural and aesthetic resistance in all the narratives that I've discussed and in many more that could be addressed needs attention. If we ignore it, opting to see Native American personal narrators as powerless victims of institutional collectors and inscribers, we simply perpetuate the colonial process. It may ease our collective guilt about the texts we study and the careers we have based on Native cultures to read and write about collector/editors as colonial agents, but it does not advance the discipline. It's a ready-made paradigm that requires little more than picking out the right incidents and examples to prove an already obvious point. I simply don't think Native American narrators are victims. I think they have and still use this form of storytelling to their own purposes. Far more often than not, those purposes have been obscured by editors, but even in the worst of examples, we should not assume that Native voice and intention have been obliterated.

As I've outlined above, collaborative inscription of a Native American life depends on a unique relationship developed between two or more individuals from different cultures that takes place in a particular setting and time. As Ruth Behar notes, the "conversations and interactions in the field can never again be exactly reproduced. They are unique, irrecoverable, gone before they happen, always in the past, even when written up in the present tense" (7). Further, the collector never "hears an account identical with that which the same narrator would give to another person" (6). Given the impossibility of transforming the field encounter into a text that comes close to evoking the performance of personal narrative, it's very easy to become discouraged about preparing a collaborative autobiography for publication. But ultimately, the partnership of Native narrator and collector/editor, once undertaken, demands inscription. The question is not whether to inscribe, but how. As Shaobo Xie notes, "In a world burdened by a few centuries of coloniality, it is impossible to construct identities and forms of knowledge uncontaminated by universalist or Eurocentric concepts and images" (17). It is naïve to believe that Native personal narratives can be published without colonial contamination, but it is possible to re-vision collaborative personal narrative as neither indigenous nor colonial, but inscription which inhabits "an intervening space," what Xie terms "the Third Space of enunciation, the hybrid, ambivalent, in-between space of signification" (17).

If Ted Rios's story seems to have gotten lost in my discussion of Native American collaborative personal narrative, it hasn't, not really. The work we did together is in one sense irrecoverable, as ephemeral as a memory, but it is also accessible, recorded on tape and in transcriptions and potentially transformable into a genuinely collaborative text. For the present, it is the foundation of all the views I have expressed. It is his narrative and his active partnership in the project we began together that has shaped how I read the texts I've discussed here. Ted was the victim of a hit-and-run driver when I first met him, and certainly he was the victim of U.S. Indian policies that went into effect long before he was even born, but he was not a narrative victim.

Now that I've said what I've had to say, I need to say one more thing—a kind of epilogue and caveat. To one degree or another, every collector/editor of a Native American collaborative autobiography has wrestled with the issues I've put forth—at a pace presumably faster than I have—and simply found it impossible to solve the problems inherent in transforming narration to inscription. She or he has accepted to one degree or another a level of responsibility most literary endeavors neither recognize nor accommodate and has gone ahead and published the work

in the best possible form available at the time.¹⁸ Maybe there comes a time to stop carting the transcripts around and get down to inscription even though I distrust my capacity to represent, let alone evoke, the complex interactions that produced the raw text of Ted's narrative. Maybe this is just my long apology for all the mistakes and inadequacies the Rios autobiography will reveal when it comes into print. Memory fails, words fail. Being a culture broker, Native or non-Native, is risky. The shudder I felt crossing that cattle guard at Sells over a decade ago resonates in my mind and bones. But now as then, it's too late to turn back. Ted and I made a deal. He took the risk and narrated his life. You'll be the judges of how well I hold my end of our bargain.

NOTES

¹Formerly called Papago, the tribe officially changed its name to Tohono O'odham, meaning desert people, in the late 1980s. Anthropological documents that pre-date the change use the term Papago, and many tribal members use the two terms interchangeably; however, contemporary ethnography and official documents use O'odham. The tribe holds the second largest reservation in the state of Arizona; it abuts the Mexican border and extends westward to the Gulf of Cortez; a small part of the reservation is just ten miles from Tucson and is the site of one of the Kino missions, San Xavier del Bac.

²The Doris Duke collection at the University of Arizona houses a number of transcripts of interviews with O'odham men and women. The one with Theodore Rios was collected by Timothy Dunnigan. It is particularly useful in analyzing topics Rios chose to discuss or avoid, depending on the gender of the collector.

³The film, in which he narrated several stories to me and two students from the University of Arizona was later aired, in part, on a show called "Rocky Mountain Mix" broadcast from Denver, Colorado. But the actual purpose of the filming was as a pilot for *Words and Place*, a series focused on Southwest Native American writers and traditional storytellers developed and produced by Larry Evers.

⁴"Telling a Good One: A Papago Autobiography," *MELUS* 10.3 (Fall 1983): 55–65. This article demonstrates the control Rios exerted on the telling of his life in relationship to his sense of multiple audiences and supports the argument in this paper.

⁵In the introduction to her book *The Life and Times of Grandfather Alonso*, ethnographer Blanca Muratorio makes a comment I empathize with regarding the difficulty of moving from collecting to publishing. She says that her editing

decisions "involved substantial risks of accurate representation, as the recent general literature on oral narratives specifies in considerable detail . . ." She claims, "If all those guidelines are followed to the letter the ethnographer could be easily paralyzed into not publishing at all, a decision that in my case would have betrayed an explicit request of the subject" (16). I find my situation somewhat different but parallel to Muratorio's.

⁶Discussing Native American collaborative personal narrative as a genre has been going on for several decades, but the term itself is a Euro-American imposition of a literary category onto a form which is neither Western nor accommodating to the conventions referred to by the terms genre and autobiography. Process, rather than genre, seems a more useful way of discussing this hybrid Native/Euro-American collaborative form of narration and inscription. Abandoning genre classification and the use of the term autobiography might also redirect critical focus away from the collector/editor toward more careful examination of the Native narration.

⁷Both the terms "authority" and "authenticity" are counter-productive in the discussion of Native American cultures and literary production; they perpetuate the hegemonic relationship of Western to Native cultures. More useful is David L. Moore's term "fallibility" as he uses it in his discussion of cultural property (personal communication).

⁸*Telling a Good One: The Theory and Process of Native American Collaborative Personal Narrative* is under advance contract with the University of Nebraska Press.

⁹Nor do I believe post-colonial is a useful term in discussing Native American collaborative autobiographies if this term is seen as "a counterdiscourse [sic] of the formerly colonized Others against the cultural hegemony of the modern West with all its imperial structures of feeling and knowledge" (Xie 9). Tribal discourse from oral tradition to contemporary written literature cannot be reduced to merely responses to hegemonic systems; it exists independently in relation to local communities and literary criteria, not only in relation to Western political structures and forms of discourse.

¹⁰I would like to thank the participants in the Native American Literatures conference at Chateau de la Bretesche, Brittany, France, June 23–25, 1997, for their comments and suggestions for revision of this paper which was first presented at the seminar. Of particular value were questions, observations, comments, and terminology offered by David L. Moore, Paula Gunn Allen, Kathryn Shanley, Hartwig Isernhagen, David Murray, and Kimberly Blaeser.

¹¹Colonialism as a "disembodied world system, or capitalism in the abstract" (Muratorio 14) is not very useful. Only when we examine it at work at the local level, which is the case in collaborative Native American autobiography, can it become a tool for analysis; however, that analysis tends to be historical, not literary, in its intent. Applied specifically, as T. J. Jackson Lears notes, "by clarifying the political functions of cultural symbols, the concept of cultural

hegemony can aid intellectual historians trying to understand how ideas reinforce or undermine existing social structures and social historians seeking to reconcile the apparent contradiction between the power wielded by dominant groups and the relative cultural autonomy of subordinate groups whom they victimize" (568). As applied to literary texts, colonialism tends to move the critic away from elements of the narrative to speculation on the social relationship of the dominant to the dominated.

¹²For a critical reassessment of the issue of the monologic in Native texts, see David L. Moore's "Decolonizing Criticism: Reading Dialectics and Dialogics in Native American Literatures," *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 6.4 (Winter 1994): 7–35. This essay addresses the problem of simply viewing the interactions between collectors and Native narrators as colonialist in a broader and more theoretical sense than is approached in this essay.

¹³Throughout the essay I've used the term "collaborative" in referring to Native American personal narratives because I genuinely believe that whatever the outcome, the process is a dialogic collaboration. Though my stance on this issue may be debatable, I'll stand by the term until something more precise appears. What gives me more difficulty in discussing the topic is the term "autobiography." The term has been the focus of a good deal of rumination in this field, and in the past two decades a number of critics have come up with adjectives to make it more appropriate to discussion of Native American personal narratives—as-told-to autobiography, bi-autobiography, composite autobiography, ethnographic autobiography, mediated autobiography, etc. None seems very satisfactory because these narratives do not conform to the conventions of Euro-American autobiography, which is the source of the genre terminology. Further, the inclusion of the term autobiography in critical scholarship of Native American personal narratives may actually contribute to missing the elements of resistance. We read what we expect to find in the genre as it is defined in non-Native studies instead of what is actually in the text.

I often use "personal narrative" as a synonym for autobiography, but that is not satisfactory either because there are many kinds of personal narrations that do not incorporate the characteristics of this hybrid form of literary expression we usually call American Indian or Native American autobiography. I think we need to become much more sophisticated in our categorization of these narratives. For instance, might collaborative biography better suit some works usually listed as Native American autobiographies? The next question, of course, has to be, which ones? But even answering that will not solve the problem because it simply substitutes another Euro-American term to describe a form of literary inscription that is shaped by two separate literary systems. Whether debating such terms is ultimately a productive endeavor is problematic, but recognizing the difficulties that imprecise language imposes on the accuracy of scholarly criticism seems to me imperative to accurate reading of collaborative texts.

¹⁴The issue of narrative silence as a strategy for protecting cultural knowledge is a topic that deserves full discussion, but is beyond the scope of this

essay.

¹⁵Sarris is not the first to point out that editor/collectors regularly restructure narrative sequence to establish chronology in Native American collaborative narrative and that in doing so they usually eliminate repetition as well. David Brumble, for instance, takes up this issue in his 1988 book on the genre. In that discussion, however, as in Sarris's, the demands of publishers who market primarily to mainstream American audiences who expect chronology in a life story are not broached. Nor does either critic address what I think is a more interesting issue: Muratorio points out, that "in a single narrative such as a life story often there is more than one sense of time expressed by the subject, including that of the editor who, by the way, does not necessarily need to have only one sense of time . . ." (16). So while I am sympathetic to the importance of an inscribed text revealing multiple concepts of time, and to the critic analyzing whatever form of time is inscribed, I would not posit that merely an absence of chronology is a solution to the tension between Native and Euro-American narrative conventions of time.

¹⁶Hertha D. Sweet Wong's attention to traditional narrative styles and expressive categories in *Sending My Heart Back Across the Years* (Oxford University Press, 1992) offers an example of the value of reading published collaborative narratives in the context of traditional forms of self and communal expression.

¹⁷See "Collaboration and Colonialism: Native American Women's Autobiography," forthcoming in *MELUS*.

¹⁸Perhaps my own collaborative experience and other instances of fieldwork on this topic have made me more sympathetic to collector/editors and Native narrators than some of my colleagues are.

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Telling Stories Through the Stage: A Conversation with William Yellow Robe

Elvira Pulitano

Why do you teach playwriting? The general answer is: to expand the voice of Native people. But for me, an instructor and a student of theater, my answer is that I am tired of non-Native people writing about the Indian culture and the spirituality of Native people, and the general lack of awareness about Native people.

Playwriting, and all the other art forms, are political when people of color do it because we empower ourselves, we take control of our past, present and future.

One of the most talented and prolific Native American playwrights at this time, William Yellow Robe, Jr., an Assiniboin Sioux from Montana, appears in the scenario of contemporary Native American drama as one of the new voices and bright hopes for the future. An enrolled member of the Assiniboin tribe of the Fort Peck Indian reservation in Northeastern Montana, he was raised in traditional Indian ways in Wolf-Point (Montana) where he graduated from high school. Raised by his mother, Mina Rose, he attended the University of Montana where he studied history, journalism and the performing arts. He is the author of jolting one-act and full-length plays, some of which have been mounted under his direction at Ensemble Studio Theater in New York and at the American Conservatory in San Francisco. His one acts include Sneaky (1982), Wink-da (1984), The Breaking of Another Circle (1985), The People (1989), A Coyote's Tale (1989), and The Star Quilter (1995). His full-length plays, some of which he is still rewriting, include The Independence of Eddie Rose (1995), The Pendleton Blanket (1996), and A Stray Dog (1996). Sneaky, his first play, was published in the anthology Slant Six: New Theater from the Minnesota's Playwrights' Center in 1990 and The Star Quilter appeared in Native Playwrights' Newsletter, Madison,

Wisconsin. The rest of his work is still in manuscript. A member of several organizations such as *The Drama League in New York* and *The Group Theater in Seattle*, he received the Princess Grace Award in 1989. For the last three years, he has served as an instructor at the Institute of American Indian Art (IAIA) in Santa Fe, New Mexico teaching Playwriting in the Creative Writing Department. In 1994, under his supervision, the first Annual Playwriting festival was established with the intent to facilitate the development of IAIA student playwrights. The most significant result of the festival was the publication of the anthology *Gathering Our Own* (1996), the first collection to appear after Hanay Geiogamah's *New Native American Drama* in 1980, the first anthology of drama promoting "a new generation of storytellers."

I became interested in Yellow Robe's work in the fall of 1996, as I began writing my M.A. thesis on contemporary Native American Drama. We first met in Santa Fe, on October 5, 1996, when he generously brought me most of his one-acts' manuscripts. We met in the smoking area of the shopping center of De Vargas Mall, a place that although animated and fairly crowded did not break the sense of isolation, and quietness. We began talking about his plays in general and the situation of contemporary Native American Theater. His words flowed unrelentingly, as if he was not answering my questions but rather telling his own story. We met a second time, on October 26, and this time we talked more specifically about his one-act plays and his writing process. Always in De Vargas Mall, his imposing yet calm voice gradually took hold of the small area where we were sitting, as the smell of morning coffee slowly filled the air.

Elvira Pulitano: Why did you decide to write a play on AIDS?

William Yellow Robe: I think it is because during the AIDS epidemics my mother was the one who made the comment "Why are they allowing their people to die?" This is when the Reagan administration refused to move on research and development for a cure for AIDS, and it fascinated my mother that they were allowing their own people to die and they wouldn't take the steps to confront the disease and try to find a cure; also I think it was important because it was an issue that was brought out that we had survived the smallpox epidemic that hit this country at the turn of the 1800s and how devastating it was to us and for Native people. If AIDS was to spread upon the reservation . . . how would we survive this? But see, historically, my people, the Assiniboiné were devastated in 1887–89; in 1887, the Fort Peck Indian reservation signed a treaty with the State

government, and by the time the Assiniboiné signed the treaty, in 1889, nearly seven thousand Assiniboiné were killed and died due to disease, starvation, and cold, but this image of where they stacked their bodies like wood, pieces of wood, this image stuck in my mind and was a very powerful image in a lot of my work; it appears in *Sneaky*, and it appears again in *The People*. *The People* again was asking that question "Why are you allowing this to happen to America? Why are you allowing this to happen to your own people?" which was so fascinating to us.

EP: What are the general themes in your plays; what do you basically write about?

WYR: Well, I basically start from stories that were told me when I was a very young man, and from there I add on the contemporary themes because in this country, in America being that it is so violent, the cycle of violence repeats itself; it's like this madness that will eventually overwhelm people and then slowly goes back and then again in ten/twenty years reemerges and just consumes the soul and psyche of America. But you see, the fascinating thing about America that has always amazed me is the tremendous amount of violence within the relationship between the U.S. government and the Native people. Those cycles are on-going; there has been really no break in it. It's the same action, whether it's stealing the land, stealing the culture, stealing the language, or stealing the religion. It goes on; it's part of colonialism that hasn't really been stopped. . . . There is still a fight for freedom. Unfortunately, everybody believes that everybody was put into the melting pot, but the Native people never melted. The tribes never melted and that's what my plays are saying.

EP: You have a series of one-act plays and then you have full-length plays. How do you set the structure for this different range of work?

WYR: The structure is different because I still follow the tradition of oral storytelling, but also it's part of my madness, it's my madness that actually sets the structure, because . . . also it's part of the anger, part of the anger that I have. I grew up in a working-class family. My father went as far as a seventh grade education, and my mother went as far as the ninth grade, and they were all very hard manual laborers; in fact the image that my father gave me of my mother was, "When I first married your mother her hands were like a man's because they were so callused from doing all that manual labor," and that's one of the images that I keep to. But a lot of that has to do with the fact that I grew up in a situation where I didn't like the bullying; in the school years, I didn't like bullies,

I don't like any form of oppression, I think it's so unhealthy, it's evil in this world.

EP: How did you become a playwright?

WYR: I wrote my first play when I was in sixth grade; off and on between that point I had written fiction, short stories, and poems and I still write poetry today. But it's for myself that I write poems. I have a total of 700 poems that I have not published, but I think that the reason why is . . . that there is a level of intimacy with an audience that you don't have in poetry reading you don't have in reading a short story aloud, but also . . . theater was designed for a community effort, and through that ritual of the community getting together to do the play you can share things, you can share love, you can share torment, you can share joy or despair and eventually, hopefully, you can motivate an audience to open their eyes and to look at their lives. . . .

EP: So, would you say that theater as an artistic medium is the most congenial form to convey that level of intimacy with an audience?

WYR: Well, it is. If that happens, it's a wonderful and beautiful thing, it's an amazing piece of art if that happens, but remember now, we are here in America. In America, it is much different. In America there are times where you don't have Native actors, and you have non-Natives. So, instead of actually spending the time in developing the scripts, you spend your time in educating the non-Native actors, because there come in the stereotypes, there comes in the other garbage that you must somehow help them get rid of, or to recognize and then build on that. So, it slows down the nurturing process of the play itself, and eventually some night, when the play is performed it doesn't necessarily mean that you get the full flavor of the play itself, so it's always a risk.

EP: Do you feel somehow confined by the structure of Euramerican theater when you write your plays?

WYR: Yes. One of the things that I've taught my students in teaching playwriting is to remember that this art form in this country is a business, it is a huge business; as with any art form introduced in this country you go through this process of commercialization That's how art is regarded nowadays. Art isn't really regarded for the true aesthetic of art, and in the past two years in this country or the last five years, American theater has been saying we are not going to do original work; we are going to do the plays to put people in the seats, so we make money, and that's how the trend of American theater has gone. This is very dangerous

because if you focus on that, then you lose the side of the creative art.

EP: In a 1989 interview, you talk about your experience of working with non-Indian directors and you mention the fact that, to a certain extent, they can understand structure, but in terms of content they miss something because of all the preconceived images regarding Native American cultures. Could you elaborate on that?

WYR: Well, to give you an example, I have just finished a play for the BBC which was broadcast two weeks ago in London. The very first play that was commissioned was called *The Idol Maker*, and we had problems with it when one of the producers, talking about the main characters, said: "Shouldn't they be drinking?" and I said: "Why?" and he said: "But they are Indians, aren't they?" And I said: "No, (*laughing*) even though they are Indians, it doesn't necessarily mean they have to be drunk."

EP: Should they wear feathers or bows?

WYR: Yes, yes, and that happens quite a bit. Within this round of American theater there is really a hard-core colonial racist attitude, which believes theater only begins with the Europeans, and yet the oldest American theater here is the Yiddish theater in New York. It's the oldest establishment of American theater and it is ethnic, but it never gets credit for being the first American theater. That's the reason why there is such conflict now . . . multicultural groups who are now longing to express themselves in theater are being dictated to by the mainstream structure. If a play doesn't fall within the parameters of that mainstream theater, that mainstream structure, even though it is still a valid theatrical event or expression of theater, it loses its validation, so you are invalidated right away, and many times when I try to explain things that are cultural, significant things within the scripts, I am always told: "Well, William, in the theater we do this." They are trying to invalidate my arguments and my reasoning with just that ethnocentric sense they have of what theater is. So, it becomes very frustrating. In fact, when I started to teach at the Institute of American Indian Art, three years ago, I turned my back completely on mainstream theater because I found it very oppressive, economically, socially, artistically.

EP: Could you to talk about your experience at IAIA in Santa Fe?

WYR: I did a workshop there in 1992 in theater, in acting and playwriting, and then I was hired part-time to replace the chair of the department who was going on sabbatical. He asked if I would fill in for Mr. Arthur Sze, who is a Chinese-American poet, and so I started teaching

Playwrighting One, Playwrighting Two, and Playwrighting Three. In my first year there, with the help of the students we established the first students' playwrighting festival, and the most important thing that came out of the festival was that, for the Native youths, it was another medium that they could use to express their Native voice. One of the things about the IAIA is that they had already published four anthologies of Native poetry, fiction, and essays, but we had students in the past who had plays but no vessel to use to express their voice, and so the festival and eventually the production was a way for them to express their Native voice. But there was another issue at hand. Because it is the Institute of the American Indian Arts, we had sixty to eighty different tribal nations' representatives. I think what was really the issue at hand was how we worked together as Native people. One of the students whom I later adopted—he adopted me as his uncle (he is Pawnee)—came to me one time during a break in a rehearsal and said: “You know what, uncle? In the old days we would be enemies,” and it was very true. A hundred years ago, I would try to kill him and he would try to kill me.

Unfortunately mainstream America is so ignorant, so ignorant of that cultural aspect, and that again goes back to the melting pot. Because we are called Indians, somehow we have been imagined, and it's not true. I think that a strength in my work is that I present the contemporary Native American—even the drunken characters are very contemporary—the view I present shatters the beliefs of a lot of people, it shatters a lot of myths. At one point, I was considered a very radical writer because I didn't do the magical mystery that shares the deal with mysticism and similar stuff. Or I didn't do the history plays, you know, things that happened 200 years ago, and that is why it was very difficult for me to have a production. At the same time, I knew that when the students graduate here, the haunting nightmare for me is: “Where would they get the work produced? Where are they going to have their plays produced? Who will produce their plays?” So, after the festival, that's when we started producing plays. We started producing students' work because my fear, and it's still my fear today, is that this is the only way their work is going to get produced in this country because even the students' work attacks a lot of the stereotypes. It attacks a lot of the misconceptions, and they won't be produced. . . . It was wild, it was exciting to keep doing new work but, at the same time, the harsh reality of America was always a wake-up call. I was amazed that some of the students were able to receive readings at different universities across the country, but the bottom line is: “Where will they get produced?” This country is very harsh, it doesn't want to deal with reality, it likes the myth of John

Wayne, it likes the myth of the western, etc. and when reality comes up and bites, it shocks, it terrifies.

EP: That's true. I was thinking of a novel like *Almanac of the Dead*, by Leslie Silko, a novel that I have read for one of my graduate seminar courses in Native American Literature at UNM. The novel has been negatively reviewed throughout the country because of its disturbing themes. The reason I am referring to it is that, in my opinion, the whole process of what sells works for all the literary genres, not only for the theater. When a person does something radical like you do, like other people such as Silko do, the reaction is always negative. What about your experience with the New York Theater?

WYR: The New York Theater was at University of Massachusetts, and that was with Roberta Uno. I am still in contact with Roberta. She was the one who produced *Sneaky*, and she was a wonderful director. She is a Japanese-American, she is a very giving woman who actually started the New World Theater. At one point, this was called the Third World Theater because she was giving voice to Asian playwrights, but she changed the name “Third world” into “New world.” “New World” gives the feeling of being bright and something that has always been here. Roberta . . . was always an encouragement, and the support that she gave was wonderful. I can't deny, it was phenomenal, and I am happy that she is out there. In fact, she has published one of my student's plays, Terry Gomez's *Intertribal*, in a collection of plays by women of color. This was in 1987.

EP: What about the Seattle Group Theater?

WYR: Tim Bond, the artistic director, was the one who actually listened to my story. I was a student of theater at the University of Montana and I had signed a contract to do a book for a musical for a touring company sponsored by the University of Montana, a semi-professional company called the Montana Repertoire Theater. The book for the musical was called *Harvest*, which dealt with three generations of white farmers in America. Now we had a conflict about the story-line. . . . This basically cost me my possibility of graduate work. I was dropped out of the department. I was one of sixty drama majors, and I was the only Native person. It was the Seattle Group Theater that gave me life. Tim Bond called me in March saying, “By the way, congratulations. Your play has been selected for the multicultural playwright's festival,” and so, by May, I had traveled to Seattle and it was Jim Bond, and Rubin Sierra, among others, who really helped the start of my professional career.

EP: When was that?

WYR: In 1986.

EP: Speaking about storytelling in your work, and speaking about the structure of these plays, it strikes me, the fact that there is a lot of storytelling in Greek theater too, something that if compared to the Native American oral tradition obviously appears different, owing to the cultural diversities. Would you say that Native American drama shares similarities with the ancient theater of Dionysus?

WYR: Yes. I studied a lot of it. In fact there is a book called *Greek Mythology* that I read in high school, and in fact as a special art project, we had to study the Romans, and we actually had to take a Roman name. I took on Leopold, I don't know why. In high school, I was always fascinated by the mythology and I have always wondered why Europe got away from it; it was similar to the Iktomi, or Coyote creation stories. Why did Europe get away from it? The only reason I can come up with is Christianity, but I always found it fascinating, because I look at the Greek mythology and the stories of the Native people are not that different. I mean you had monsters, you had gods, there are similarities, unique in their own ways, and it's amazing that for theater, City of Dionysus, America has never had something like that and I think that's where American theater fails, that's the reason why American theater doesn't have roots, like the European. City of Dionysus gave European theater roots. We don't have anything like that. For Native people, there is no word for art, art doesn't exist within the language of certain people, but at the same time, the ritual of expression has always existed. As a Native person, I look at theater for Native people in terms of the ritual but also still keeping the sacredness of the values of that group of people. Saying that, having to do with the stories of the Assiniboine, I wouldn't put on stage certain things even though they are highly theatrical because I have to keep the sacredness intact and I always have to remember what the ritual is meant for. I think theater for Native people can be very helpful as a way of keeping culture intact. It's also a way of sharing stories; it's a way of sharing values; it's a way of sharing the spirituality and sharing identity of who we are in this country, and not so much as a reminder to us but as a reminder to mainstream society that we haven't quit, the war hasn't stopped yet. I think that is the most important message. Some of the plays that I really enjoy among the ancient Greeks are *The Bacchae*, Aristophanes' *The Frogs*, Euripides, Sophocles' *Antigone*, and that's what *Sneaky* was compared to at one time. *Oedipus the King* trilogy. There are

also a lot of French plays and Shakespeare, too. I'd love to do a Native interpretation of Shakespeare. And I would love to do a Native interpretation of *Antigone* and I would love to do a Native interpretation of *Oedipus*, but it's been a long time since I have read these plays.

EP: What about the influence of contemporary dramatic movements as, for instance, the Theater of the Absurd?

WYR: No, I think that it goes back to the idea of Native writers being labeled as magical realists; it was a phrase that they used several years ago.

EP: They still use it.

WYR: Yes, I think that the reason why it was such an easy label to use was that ghosts, that sense of spirituality, exist for us. There is a really thin line between those two worlds. I think that's the reason why Greek tragedy appeals to me because even in the mythology there was a thin line between humans, ghosts, gods, etc., and today a lot of Native people still believe that there is a threshold between the two worlds. For me it's everyday life because even growing up there is an absurdity to life. I always used a story, that's an image in *Sneaky*. A grandfather had passed away back in the '40s on the Fort Peck Indian Reservation and they brought back the grandson to be at the burial; there was one moment that was so charming to me; it made me cry even though at first I laughed because he was imprisoned. He was taken to the funeral escorted by prison guards, his hands and feet shackled, and when he was at the graveside, his father started crying. The guards could have released him, but he walked over to his father in his shackles and tried to throw his arms around his father. To me it was kind of fun, at the same time it was so absurd . . . a human being reaching after another, but he had shackles on him, he had the shackles. Within that sense, in "inhumanity," he was able to get past the shackles to do something that was very human. Even the lifestyle of the violence on the reservation—the physical violence that you have—the harshness of that reality puts you in situations that are absurd, that are unbelievable, that deal with the realm of magic, but spirituality is a better word.

EP: What can you say about the general situation of contemporary Native American Theater?

WYR: It's an issue of economics in this country, that's one factor. The second factor is that there are too many nations in this country. What works for the Assiniboine, doesn't necessarily work for the Diné or

Navajo; what works for the Diné-Navajo does not work for the Mescalero Apaches, does not work for the Pueblo, does not work for the Oneida, does not work for the Northwest tribes. The first thing that has to happen is that there has to be a common ground where we can all meet almost like a tribal council, or celebration. When I did theater here, I used the aesthetics of a celebration. In fact, at the very end last year, we changed our playwrighting festival to a playwrighting celebration to include all the other tribes that were involved. The other thing is that there are other resources that come with payments; if you hire a technical director to help you to check your shelf, they bring all the white aesthetics of mainstream theater and they actually will voice their opinions and say “No, you can’t do this,” where if you were a white director, they wouldn’t even dream of doing that. Because you are Native, they think they have the right to show you how it’s done correctly, so you have to overcome that. One of the things we promoted here at the Institute was that, with the students who called themselves Native playwrights, I asked them: what is Native playwrighting, what makes your plays Native, what separates them from other plays? Because this is the question that you have to deal with if you work within Native theater: what is it that is Native, and how do you define theater?

EP: How would you answer that question? What does it mean for you to be a Native playwright and what’s Native theater?

WYR: Well, it’s a long answer. . . . I think that the first one is how do you define Native; you can use the federal government explanation, the whole issue of blood-quantity, land, etc. etc. But I think the first thing is to identify yourself as a Native person, the first step is to claim the blood, you claim the blood, and I claim the blood, I stand with the blood, and eventually my bones will be buried with my people, my ashes will rest with my people. As a Native playwright, I see theater more as a contemporary Native storyteller; you think of an art form, a medium known as theater to express the story, but at the same time, I don’t claim it as mine, I see it more as a vessel to be used and to share the story. It’s like in the past when we would come together in the huge lodge and share these stories, but now the lodge is the theater structure itself. As a Native person, eventually I would like to see a theater constructed into that lodge so that would be the theater that we operate in, something more of the lodge, where we can share these stories. . . . Since I have been teaching here I’ve become more of a nationalist. I really don’t give a damn what mainstream theater thinks of my art . . . but I think that it’s important that Native people be aware that they have a right to voice themselves, and to

voice their people’s voices. Theater is one way of doing it because every Native community has rituals that are much older than theater and, if they want it, they can adapt this as another way to express the voice of the community. We were terrorizing our students last year by saying: “You are a Native poet: what does that mean? What makes your poetry Native? You are using the English language, you are not using your traditional language; is it the values of these stories, is it the values within the lines, is it the souls that are in the lines? What is it that makes you a Native writer?” Now, a lot of the stuff that I have produced is a result of where I grew up, how I was raised, and that is strictly Native, more specifically Assiniboine, but yet there is a general amount of it that all Native people can identify with.

EP: How about non-Native playwrights staging plays on Native issues? How about *Black Elk Speaks*?

WYR: That was a mess in itself. Several things happened. Now the play itself. . . . Donovan Marley, who is the artistic director of the Denver Center Theater Company, has had problems in the past with mainstream theater; he was threatened in a law suit. Donald meant to avoid any losses with *Black Elk Speaks*, and did an interpretation. It’s like I’m taking Exodus and I am going to rewrite it to fit it to my needs, that’s the similarity; but non-Indians don’t understand how tragic this is; it’s like me taking the New Testament and saying: “Well, I am going to say that there weren’t twelve disciples, there were only six.” Now, Donovan Marley is a respected theater artist, he is a respected director, so therefore everything he does would be validated, even though it’s wrong. They tried to take that to Broadway several times. They had a theater company, The American Indian Theatre Company, and they succeeded. I have seen productions failing, brought down to their knees, because of pettiness and, at the same time, I have seen petty acts brought to a height of almost universal traits and it was the most disrespectful thing that has ever happened, and *Black Elk Speaks* is one of those things. A lot of Natives applauded because now they have work, Native actors now have work every time *Black Elk Speaks* is performed in any major city. But you see, they are promoting the lie, and that’s the real, devastating thing about being in America. We haven’t had a movie yet that deals with contemporary Natives. Theater is the same; most plays that have been done about Natives are usually written by non-Natives and deal with historical aspects and magical mystery, but never with contemporary situations, and that’s what has to happen, because, once that happens, then we as Native people are validated . . . with *Black Elk Speaks* . . . you can praise it for what it

did for the Sioux people, but in the larger picture, it would prevent younger contemporary writers from telling their stories. Productions like *Black Elk Speaks* prevent other voices from being heard. I wish there were simple answers to these questions because they would make life a little less complicated . . . but there are so many things involved in the making of this creature, that there is no simple answer, there is no simple explanation.

Interview (Part II, Santa Fe, 10/26/96)

EP: I've noticed that most of the characters in your plays are young men facing the dilemma of living between the two cultures. Is that something that you have experienced living on the reservation?

WYR: I think it is because it represents a generation where because of the alcohol cycle, and the breakdown of the extended family, they are very much a lost generation, they exemplify the whole thing of almost complete assimilation. They are a lost generation here in America, and so they are a good representation of that. They do have that collective consciousness that they know that they belong, and they seek that voice, that connection that will bring them back.

EP: Are these characters based on people that you know, or knew?

WYR: Well, most of the stories are biographies, almost biographies. There is a little bit of myself in almost every character, in all the plays, even in the *Coyote's Tale*, but most of them are based on real events that I have fictionalized to a certain extent. A lot of stories like *The Breaking of Another Circle*, *Wink-dah* and *Sneaky*, are all true. Actually *Sneaky* was different. I began writing *Sneaky* way back in 1982, and three years after the play was completed, my uncle lost his wife and actually did the burial himself, so sometimes I find myself writing plays and then within one year, two years later, I find out that actually happened. So, it's kind of funny.

EP: I have read that in *Sneaky* you changed the ending; in a previous draft, it was Frank who had the last word, whereas in the published version it is Kermit. Did you do that on purpose?

WYR: No, Kermit has always had the last word; the switch was that Eldon was the one who initiated the Our Father's prayer; it was his big moment of finally bringing his Christianity into that, but then I decided to go with Frank because since he was a pivotal character, when it came

time to pray he didn't know how to pray himself and so that's the reason why I switched to Frank.

EP: It is interesting because you read the play and Frank seems the most traditional of the characters, and Kermit seems the one who is completely lost, but then at the end you realize that he has the last word and he brings the two brothers together.

WYR: Yes, I think that the key word in the play is "seems"; they seem to know this, they seem to have this and I think that's the biggest mistake—people assume that this happens and it doesn't. It happened to me at the University of Montana. It was my second year as a college student, my first year at a big University and I grew up with this white kid who once turned to me and said: "Bill how come you don't speak like an Indian and you don't sound like an Indian?" and I looked at him and said: "How do you think an Indian sounds?" and see, that's the stereotype that *Sneaky* was a part of, the whole thing that you don't seem, you don't appear, you don't sound. It was the stereotype that had to be attacked.

EP: Does the Prologue originate out of a story that you have been told?

WYR: Yes, actually it's an historical event. I was born and raised in the town of Wolf Point. When I was growing up, we used to go swimming at Wolf Creek, and we always passed a Montana Historical Society marker which read "the town of Wolf Point received its name because historically Wolf Point was a stopping point for the steam boats going to St. Louis, Missouri, and when they stopped here they would pick up these wolf pelts, coyote pelts, and badger pelts and that's how the city received its name." Then, when I was growing up, I did research and I found out why they had all these pelts; between 1887 and 1889 over six thousand of Assiniboiné died, and because of the bad winter, they couldn't bury them in the winter, so they stacked bodies like cord wood and the wolves and coyotes came down and ate upon the bodies. I did some more research, and there were survivors of that period, of that holocaust, and they talked about living in lodges and hearing these wolves ripping flesh off the dead bodies. It was also based on my grandmother. When spring did finally break up in the summer, they did finally bury the bodies in a mass gravesite, and when she was going to visit her cousin, she came across a little mound, because of the stinking graves. She looked down and saw a badger coming out of the mound and it had a human hand, a skeleton in its mouth. She was born 10 years after the deaths, but when I was young, she told me: "When I die, don't bury me in the wooden casket," because she didn't want the animals getting at her body, and that was a real fear

for her. Traditionally, the Assiniboine had about eight variations of burial, and at one point they would bury them two feet underneath the ground, then when they actually started burying them in the trees, the BIA officers would come by and pull the bodies out and then bury them. So, that's how that whole story got set up for *Sneaky*.

EP: You mentioned earlier that *Sneaky* has been compared to *Antigone*. Were you conscious of Sophocles' influence when you first wrote the play?

WYR: No, it's just a story. I have always told my students that basically I am psychotic. Every once in a while I am driven. I mean, I sit down at the computer, and I hear these voices and I start writing. I find myself spending forty-eight hours at the keyboard, writing, solidly and I just can't stop, and that's the way I have been working for a number of years. But the other thing, too, is that I have read a tremendous amount of literature, both European and American plays. They haven't been influential, but at the same time, I enjoy them. I like the fact that for me they break down the pretentiousness that American society has. They always say that contemporary playwrights are angry and violent, but if you read the classics, even Shakespeare, they are tremendously violent.

EP: I am particularly interested in *The People*, in the structure of the play. To me, it's a peculiar combination of oral tradition and Brechtian theater, for all the lights and visual aids on stage. Do you agree with that?

WYR: Yes, yes. With *The People*, I wanted to break it down; I have never had a chance to develop all of the things that I learned. One of the things that I really would like to bring back in one of my plays is eventually the use of the Greek chorus. In fact, I was going to do a play called *Indians Are Us*, which is a political play based on what's happening at the IAIA and one of the things that I want to do is to have a chorus of students, Native students, and they would enter on stage wrapped in huge garbage, plastic sacks; they would enter as a group and act as a group, binding the group together; but I wanted something more, also with the sounds, to emphasize the fact that they are not hurt, and you have to make it musical, so . . . I haven't really had a chance to explore that. The reason why I wanted the images . . . it's similar to what has happened in the holocaust, in Nazi Germany. People will talk about what happened to the Jews, but the best impact is when they actually see the photographs, and that's what I wanted with *The People*. I could talk about the starvation of the Lakota tribes, but if I were able to show those images, I would have a more powerful effect. But also again, it was to balance it so it fit within

the play and it didn't become sensationalism.

EP: Definitely, it is very effective, something of what Brecht called alienation. The effect is the same, to wake up the people's consciousness, that's what I see. But I also see these voices who come and introduce stories, as a Greek chorus. How do you put these stories, these traditional stories into the written text? Most of these stories have a specific context in the oral tradition, and when they are transferred into the written text, they have somehow to be separated from that context. Could you elaborate on that?

WYR: Well, I don't know.

EP: Does it come naturally?

WYR: Yes, it comes naturally. There is a Native poet, a Native artist by the name of Arthur Emiot—he is Sioux, he is very well-known among the Native artist community—who once told me: "You know, William, you are the only Native American playwright I know right now who follows the tradition of oral storytelling and you put it into paper. How did you do that? You follow the outline, but you bring your characters all the way to the depth of pathos and at the end they rise out of it, they find enlightenment, they find this humanity, and traditionally that's the cycle of oral tradition, of oral storytelling, that's how all the old generation did it. How did you learn it?" And I said: "I think that I owe that to my grandmother, Many Bears, because, growing up, when my parents went on a trip, we would have my grandmother Many Bears living with us; at the time that she was baby-sitting us, she was about seventy-eighty years old and she had these long, white braids, and she would gather us around her every night before we went to bed and told us these great stories. She was very kind, very patient, and we were all spellbound and I think that's where I learned the process of storytelling; but also my mother, Mina Rose Yellow Robe, she told us stories. And when she told us about what happened, the events of the day, she would place it within the structure of the story, but also in that tradition of prayer, you start at the beginning, and that's how you pray. So that was a very strong tradition that was passed to me.

EP: What about the reality of AIDS in Indian reservations, especially in your reservation, in Montana?

WYR: Well, it's very frustrating. We have had a huge problem with alcoholism, and then around the mid-eighties the tribal government finally recognized the fact that alcoholism was such a devastating force, and they

began to develop treatment centers and programs, but see this is in the 1980s. Now with AIDS, what has happened was that the philosophy that was passed down from the Reagan administration was that this is a result of God punishing the homosexuals. But it also was considered an urban problem, and so many people on the reservation assumed that only urban Indians were experiencing this; but that was not true because in some cases when you have a community that is highly active sexually these diseases are transmitted easily. In the same way syphilis and gonorrhea had been passed in the '60s and '70s when we had free sex with all the hippies who came on the reservation, looking for an Indian experience. Now with the thing of AIDS—it was a premise that I was arguing when I wrote *The People*—if you're going to be sexually active, then you must be responsible because, when we have a celebration, we have people from all across the country and not only Native people, and if you are sexually active, then there is the possibility that you can contract this disease and pass it on.

EP: How do you see AIDS different from the smallpox, or maybe they are not so different?

WYR: Well, it could be the same; see with smallpox, they were able to find a cure. AIDS is so dangerous because you can't really say this is the antibody that will cure, even in mainstream society. And when we don't have the facilities for those who have contracted the disease—to take care of them—it becomes even more frightening. This is especially true because we have a medical staff that don't know how to deal with AIDS. I have heard of some people who have used traditional medicines, and one person actually said that they have cured it. At one time when I was in Minneapolis there were several people who had been diagnosed with AIDS who went to traditional healing methods and were supposedly cured of the disease, but for a lot other people, they go back into the traditions because it's a way of easing their life, so they are not frightened, they are not isolated and can coexist in this life with this disease, but it's not a guarantee that they will live. It depends on how much an individual really believes.

EP: This comes into the play, in the character of Bee. He is a very positive character, and he believes in his belonging to the community, despite of what the other people call his "diversity." I see this as the positive element in the play, that's why he survives. I was wondering, however, about Buzzy's role in the play. He is ashamed of his son.

WYR: Right. Christianity has been devastating for Native tribes.

Christianity attacked the values of the Native tribes, and so what wasn't a big issue, back then, is a big issue now. It was not uncommon for a younger man to get married to an older woman, and it wasn't uncommon for a man to have three or four wives, and this was attacked by the church. The whole perception of homosexuality has changed drastically. Some tribes really cherished the homosexual people because of that connection with spirituality, whereas others believed that this shouldn't be. It was considered abnormal and, under the influence of Catholicism, it was a damnation.

EP: What reaction did the play provoke among your people?

WYR: This is the problem. Most of my plays have never been performed for Native people. But when they have, Native people who have attended were just outstripped. Like in *The Independence of Eddie Rose*, which deals with alcoholism on the reservation, we had one member who said "I grew up in that home, that's my house on stage, you put my life on stage," and he just broke down and started crying. I have had members of different Native communities who have come to the plays, have virtually broken down and have identified with the characters in the situation because it's so close to their home. The problem that I have had is with a non-Native audience. When *The People* was first performed, there were non-Native people among the audience. It must have been hard for them to understand the structure of the play; in fact, reading the cast and the content of the plays at The Illusion Theater, a non-Native member among the audience said: "What the hell is this, a Russian play?" We get reactions like that, but at the same time, for Native people, when they have actually read the play, they were really amazed. In fact, when I came here, some of the students were just amazed, "Can you write this?" they asked. "Yes, you can," I said. These are our stories, and it's our responsibility to tell them to the best of our abilities, and theater is just one way of telling the stories.

EP: It's a very effective way. When was this play performed or read?

WYR: In 1988–89. We had two readings. The first was in March, at the Illusion Theater which is a socially, politically active theater in Minneapolis, and then it was read at the Playwright Center, and there it received the best welcoming because the audience was not only just pure white. The Playwright Center also involved an Afro-American community and they really got into the play. It's kind of strange, too, because I have had better responses from Afro-American communities and Asian communities and I find it fascinating, I really do.

EP: Yes, that's really interesting. The theme of homosexuality comes back again in *Wink-dah* with Jeremy. I'd like you to talk about the structure, since it seems to me that these are two one-act plays.

WYR: Originally, the play *Wink-dah* begins with Coyote meeting Death. It begins with Two-Shoe going to a celebration where he meets Death, and then we have scene one with Jeremy running into the tent. After that scene, Death kills Two-Shoe and then we have the fury of Ernest's father, so death is almost certain. Then the action again goes back to Two-Shoe and Death gambling for their lives and you really don't know who wins, and then it returns back to the other world. So, basically, the structure is that you have—the way I have always seen life—you have these two worlds, (*he draws on a napkin*) this is our reality, this is the spirit world, and what happens is that you have the universe, but eventually these two worlds will collide or actually they will be combined to become one. This is the way the world should exist, because within this universe you also have the animals, you have the environment, etc.

EP: And you also have evil, which is part of the balance, so it's not completely possible to destroy it.

WYR: Well, it's not as much a question of evil. I think that evil happens when you go against what you want or against what you really are, that's evil; if you are a nice person, and all of a sudden, for some strange reason, you start lying and cheating etc., then you are committing evil because you are going against your character. When you don't stand up for truth, if you know it's true, and you don't say anything, you know that's evil, because you are not taking that stand.

EP: I was actually thinking of *The Breaking of Another Circle* in which there is the Rockman, and that's evil.

WYR: Well, the Rockman is different because the Rockman is chemical, he is not organic.

EP: So, you mean that he is not the same kind of evil.

WYR: Yes. Remember, Two-shoe, Death, he is organic, he is a part of life even though he changes his form and turns into an owl; he is organic, he is still a part of life, and you can't avoid it. It is something that has to be accepted. That's also why I have always had problems with European-American writers; you have these characters going for immortality, they try to avoid death, but you have to accept it because it's a part of life. Now with *The Breaking of Another Circle*, Rockman is a chemical, he is

evil because he destroys, but at the same time he is evil that is evoked by the young boy.

EP: At the end of the play, however, Myth—Two-Shoe—destroys evil; he says “at least I have you for now.”

WYR: Well, he contains it because the question there that eventually will come out is: if these kids have gone through the whole process of paint-sniffing and glue-sniffing and have caused all this damage to their brain, to their psyche, how do we bring them back? How do we reach the thing to bring them back after all that damage, all that physical, mental, psychological damage is done, how do we bring them back?

EP: So you mean that not even the community has the capability to bring them back?

WYR: That's the question. The question is also that if the community were strong and united, then this shouldn't happen, but because the community is dissociated and is not united, it has allowed this to happen.

EP: Can you speak about the figure of the gambler? What is his role in the play?

WYR: Well, it is represented by an owl. See, the owl has a very significant job in that he announces death, he comes to collect the souls to take them to the other world. Even in the battles with Coyote or Iktomi there are stories related to this figure. One in particular that I used for *Wink-dah* talks about a village and some kids who were disappearing at night; when Iktomi came, they asked for help and he said, “Yes, I'll help” and he changed himself into the child, so that night as he was walking to another lodge, he heard something and then something grabbed him and picked him up and he looked and he was an owl, and so Iktomi said: “From now on, because you have done this, I will make people know that you are something that should be looked after.” So, the owl has always been a symbol of death, or of the coming of death.

EP: What about the trickster in your plays?

WYR: Oh, Iktomi? Iktomi is very physical One of the things about Iktomi that a lot of writers don't talk about . . . well the Navajo do, is that he is very sexual. There is one story where he has something like 40 wives, but what I really like about Iktomi is his playfulness. He can be a bumbling fool and eventually what happens is that the fool will wake up and say, “Ah, look at the lesson I taught you.” He has always been in these situations where he either condemns the villagers he is with or

enlightens them.

EP: Yes, he has this capability of bringing opposites together.

WYR: Yes, he is not like Loki. Loki is very evil, very mean-spirited, whereas Iktomi is not that mean; sometimes he has no real control over the universe, and so he takes life with the best face he possibly can. One of the interesting things about Iktomi, especially for a lot of the nationalist movements that are happening here in this country with Native people, is that he is a hero because he represents hope and he represents the ability to survive.

EP: And also change because of his ability to assume different roles.

WYR: Yes, change represents survival in today's society and that's the reason why he is a very significant character. In my work he's been a comic element, but at the same time, he can be very poignant, like in *Wink-dah* when he tries to trick death and loses in the end. Basically it is like Iktomi trying to change the color of the sun and he can't do it. He is trying to stop the sun from shining and he can't do it because it's just a huge force that he can't control, and so that's the reason why, in the end, he is so poignant. At one point in *Wink-dah* one of the cast members had asked me when Jeremy accepts the fact that he is going to die and one actor told me, "I believe that as soon as Jeremy enters the lodge, he knows he is going to die, and all throughout, the play is just a question of him accepting that death."

EP: But what about Bee? It seems to me that Bee doesn't accept his death.

WYR: Well, no. With Bee, what he has done is not evil, that's the declaration for Bee. "What I have done, my existence is not evil, my existence in this world is a common thing, just like running water, I am here but I'm not evil." Also because Bee is a younger person, similar to Jeremy, actually they are the same, but with Bee, it is also the fear of losing his family, of being alienated totally from his family. Jeremy has that but eventually Vernon gets into it. But the thing is that Jeremy can make it to his mother's house and still be accepted but with Bee, he has to be accepted by his father; it's that male-orientation attitude.

EP: Are the Assiniboiné a matrilineal culture?

WYR: No. That's another problem I have. I gave you a full-length play called *A Stray Dog*. We did that in Albany, New York, where they are matriarchal and this one woman spoke up and said, "Bill what's wrong

with you? People in the plays are being terrorized by their husbands and sons." At the end of her statement I said, "Well, that's because just because we assume that we are Indians, we all share the same values and social structures but we don't."

EP: Well, I think that women in your plays have an important role. They are so strong and powerful. They are the ones who keep the family together.

WYR: Well, it's kind of interesting that you say that because I have always been accused of being a male chauvinist. Non-Native women have always accused me of having weak female characters

EP: No, I don't think so.

WYR: I think it is because the women I grew up with were working-class women. They did phenomenal labor, with very little appreciation, and yet it was their job to keep the family intact. In fact, when the male roles have changed for Native people, it was the female who kept the family together and started to redefine their roles. I also had a very strong mother and a very strong grandmother and very strong aunts. To me it was fascinating what they would sacrifice, and how they were committed to the family, but at the same time, there is a newer generation that doesn't have that same sense of sacrifice. I think that's the real tragedy in today's society; they have lost it because of displacement, alienation, alcoholics, and social structures that have changed drastically; they don't have that same sense of commitment.

EP: Is the phenomenon of glue-sniffing and paint-sniffing on the reservations more common among young kids?

WYR: Yes, kids are introduced very early, at about eight or nine years old nowadays. Another trick, too, is taking the bandannas and wrapping them around their neck. They can't afford the glue, they can't afford the paint so they take a bandanna, wrap it around their neck and hold it until they actually strangle themselves, pass out and then they wake up. I mean they wake up, hopefully, they will wake, but sometimes . . . You see that's a cheap high, a cheap escape, and a lot of kids are looking for that. At the same time, they don't realize the damage this does to their brain. It's never been explained. In one school I taught at, in Minneapolis, the junior high school students were stealing the aerosol cans from the janitor, and they used that to get high, and they had a real problem with that.

EP: When did this phenomenon start?

WYR: Back in the 1960s, because they couldn't afford marijuana or cocaine.

EP: What do reservations do to help these people? Are there rehabilitation centers?

WYR: There are virtually no centers. They are sent to the State Drug Rehab Program, but they aren't there long enough to really make any improvement; it's like jail time. They are there for about six weeks and then here. So that doesn't really work into a comprehensive program.

EP: Let's talk about *The Star Quilter*. How did this play originate?

WYR: The star quilting theme was based on my mother. In fact, I showed the cast photographs of my mother who was working with a friend of hers; they actually got into a business with a white woman in the '60s who took their cloths and sold them in New York at five to seven times, even ten times the amount they paid for our material, etc. That business ended in the early '70s, but see my mother used to do quilting and beadwork, and she used star quilts as a form of her own expression, and she would handset everything in the cloth. Everything was handmade. She would cut the pattern, she would put the pattern together, she had her own style of stitching; in fact, to these days, if you look at the stitching, you would recognize my mother's work. She would give out quilts to the dignitaries who came into the reservation, because my father was in the tribal board, and so . . . they would give these quilts to different dignitaries, whether they were U.S. senators, governors, etc. and they would give them out at the celebrations. When it was our naming ceremonies or feasts or funerals, she always made several star quilts and gave them away for the families, and would not receive payment for it. I mean when I was growing up, I know that she would sit down and make ten star quilts for her son's give-away or her nephew's give-away, and we did have people who came to the house and they would enter without knocking sometimes. A lot of the environment that is described in the play was basically our house as I was growing up because she did buy this whole building which used to be this local hospital, a three bedroom place, and for us, that was our home. She raised nine kids in that house and was still able to do the star quilts, so when I wrote the play, it was a dedication for her and it was also a way of attacking these people. They would come to her house at 11:00 in the morning, she would feed them, and then they would leave at 3:00 or 4:00 in the afternoon, and not even acknowledge the fact that she had given so

much time to them. She did her patterns, and they were very significant because she never wrote everything down. She would actually sing songs, I can remember her humming Native songs as she worked, and there were times when she would sit and do crossword puzzles and she would sing her songs, and eventually within a week or so she would work on a new quilt, and that's how she obtained the special connection, the pattern of her quilts. One of the things that they loved about her work was the colors; they were spectacular. She was able to blend not only the colors, the star patterns, but the borders, everything. They came naturally to her.

EP: I was reading the play, and to me the most fascinating aspect of it is the way you use language to deconstruct many stereotypes and to attack peoples' misconceptions. It's interesting that every time Luanne enters Mona's house, she invades her space and also her language, she interrupts her all the time. Words are carefully crafted into a logical pattern as in a quilt. Is there a reference to the American Indian Market in Santa Fe or to the whole business of Indian art?

WYR: No, not really. I was thinking of the fact that there really is no word in some tribe for art; there really is no concept that says that this is art, as art is defined by European America. What it is, it's put into the concept of gifts, in other words the whites have a word for quality, a lot a Native people have that; if it's a gift, whether it's a star quilt, or a charcoal, or a medallion, it has to be of this quality, it has to reach its own personal quality and go beyond it with each piece. And so, that's the only way I can say art is defined, is that level of commitment, integrity, honesty, trust and, eventually, the love that goes into making that because that defines what that piece is. When you give it to a person, that defines how much that person means to you, since you are going to sacrifice this piece that you have spent so many hours constructing. And that's how art is defined, whereas in this country we define art by saying how much does that cost? Another issue that comes out in *The Star Quilter* is if, as an artist, you give all this love and commitment to a piece, how can you sell it?

EP: Could you talk about the temporal structure of the play? The fact that the play begins in the 1960s, I guess it is because it was back in the 1960s that Indians were "rediscovered" once again.

WYR: Oh, No. The reason why I did that was because in 1968 they passed the Civil Rights Voting Bill, the Civil Rights Act. Indians were finally guaranteed the first ten Bill of Rights of the Constitution. See, historically, people don't realize that Native people weren't guaranteed

the right to vote, the freedom of religion, the freedom to speak not until 1968 when they passed the Civil Rights Voting Bill; at that point we came under a small club. In 1968, we were actually considered citizens of the USA, and also that's when we started to have movements towards Native legislation, and our relationship with the USA government was clearly not defined. When the play goes to the 1970s that's when you have all this affirmative action, now including Native Americans who were voicing their opinions; and then in the 1980s again you have Native people asserting themselves. As the years progress, Mona's resistance towards Luanne becomes harsher and harsher because now she has the right to affirm and validate her actions, her emotions and feelings, and then in the 1990s when she is blind, she is finally able to say what she wants freely, without any fear from a society that would have done that to her. That whole opening sequence was based on a story that happened to one of my uncles. A lot of Native people wouldn't use locks on their doors, so they would stick a knife between the door-frame and the door; then one day he was visited by a BIA agent and he opened up, he took the knife and opened the door and stood there with a knife and the BIA agent became horrified by seeing my uncle with the knife at the door. The next day, he got another knock on the door, and he did the same thing but this time it was the BIA police. They arrested him for assaulting the BIA police, and he got five years in federal penitentiary. That's how that got set up for the first act of the play. Mona sits there in fear; she knows that if she says something or does something to this woman, she could be arrested because she has basically no support, no protection.

EP: Is this the last play you have written?

WYR: No. I have rewritten some of the full-length plays that I gave you. *The Pendleton Blanket* was rewritten at the beginning of this year, *The Independence of Eddie Rose* was rewritten last year, and then now I am working on rewriting *A Stray Dog*.

EP: Is this the play you are going to produce in Chicago with the Red Path Theater Company?

WYR: Yes, it is. *A Stray Dog* deals with the whole issue of blood quantity, that is a very controversial issue because it is institutionalized within the federal government. They actually try to determine if you are part Indian, part white, and they break that down into degrees like a pedigree, like your dog. It's institutionalized and it is applied to people.

EP: Could you name other contemporary Native American Playwrights?

WYR: Oh yes, there are several. Terry Gomez, she is here in Santa Fe. She has completed two plays, *Reunion*, and *Intertribal*; Brian Lush (my son); Bunky Echo-Hawk, Jr., who was writing a one-act play called *The Essence*; Bruce Miller, who is now retired out of theater because he's gone back to work with his people—he used to be a playwright and theater artist, but he hasn't done anything new in 15 years; Ed Two Rivers, who has just finished a play, too, and is working on a second one; Bruce King to a certain extent, but he is questionable as to what plays he did really write because he does his work by group; he has used this technique from Hanay [Hanay Geiogamah]. Hanay brought in all these talented Native artists, had them perform on stage, wrote everything down and took credit and never gave them credits for the work. And Bruce King works the same way. He brings in people, has them do the work, and then he takes credit for that. So in a sense he is not really a true playwright. He doesn't sit down with an idea, and nurture and develop it. He has other people doing the work for him. That's a common technique that a lot of Native playwrights are getting into and I wish I could get out of it because it's cheap, it's not organic, it's a fraud. A true playwright in a sense develops his own work, and then as far as the continuation of the nurturing process, then you bring in people, but you have to write it yourself, first, instead of having other people write it for you. Diane Glancy does that too. Diane is controversial because she has just discovered her Native heritage. She has never claimed her Native heritage before; she had a book of poetry that did not sell, but when she claimed her Native heritage, she became a Native writer and then her stuff started selling.

EP: Has she written any plays?

WYR: Yes, she's written three plays and now she wants to be considered a Native playwright.

EP: Are there other women playwrights that you know?

WYR: When I was at the IAIA, Monica Charles was a student there. She started there as a theater artist and poet. She was of that group of Joy Harjo, Bruce King, Bruce Miller and Gloria Bird, who used to work here.

EP: And where is she now?

WYR: She is writing poetry. But she is also interested in writing plays. She asked me if I would review her latest work. Both her and Two Rivers sent me copies of their work, but I haven't had a chance to really look at

these works.

EP: Are you going to write other plays? I hope so.

WYR: Yes, I am working on several pieces and notes and sketches. I have one scene, 15 pages of a new play called *Two White Cheeks on the Reservation*. It's a trilogy that's going to be a collection of relationships of non-Native women on the reservation, and how they perceive Native people, and then the other one I am working on is a political play called *Indians Are Us*, and deals with the IAIA and what's happening there, and then the other one is a political, social statement called *We Do Indians*. It deals with the whole concept, the business aspect of doing Native Theater in this country. The fact that they will bring a non-Native to write a play based on a book by a Native person [*Black Elk Speaks*] and the money that is involved always amazes me. I have always told my son, if you write, be a versatile writer; you will never know what you should be asked to do for money, but you should have the ability to do it, and also the intelligence to recognize whether it's right or wrong. That's the most important thing, to have the tools to look inside yourself and say "no," no matter how much money this is, I can't do it, I can't do it because it's wrong, and the ability and the strength and the courage to say no, no matter how desperate you are for money, no matter how much they offer you, no matter how broke you are. You should have the courage and the conviction to say no, and hopefully he will learn, but it's a hard process, in this country it's very difficult.

Gendered Cartography: Mapping the Mind of Female Characters in D'Arcy McNickle's The Surrounded

Roseanne Hoefel

At the close of Louis Owens's "The 'Map of the Mind': D'Arcy McNickle and the American Indian Novel," he suggests that *The Surrounded* is among the works meriting further critical attention (194). Fortunately, during the past twelve years, Richard Fleck, John Purdy, and others have redressed the former paucity of critical responses. This essay, too, attempts to assume Owens's challenge, made over a decade ago, by mapping the minds of the novel's female characters, who have borne the greatest critical neglect. Specifically, it will probe their efforts as American Indian women to resist the dominant white culture's various oppressive forces, such as infantilization. It will also assess their self-initiated, perhaps inevitable, active (and passive, in the case of Max and Catharine's daughter, Agnes) resistance, and their role as subversive change agents.

James Ruppert has noted McNickle's ethnohistorical understanding of culture as an evolving, dynamic process (185), which suggests that some members of any given culture must necessarily serve as agents of resistance and others as advocates of change or elaboration. The difficulty with this natural process inheres in the external imposition of unwanted or undesirable change, particularly when such intrusions disrupt internal order and create chaos and despair. Compounding this dilemma is the disempowerment of former internal authority figures such as the aging and increasingly ineffectual, though well-meaning, Modeste, a former Salish chief. Understandably, not only readers¹ but tribal members and those on the periphery within the novel (such as Max, the estranged Spaniard husband) look to our male protagonist, Archilde, as the hope for the future, a day in which a fusion of cultures (conjectured as peaceful) would guide the people. Such an exclusive focus, though, blinds participants within the plot, as well as readers, to the potential of female

agency; indeed, more often than not, the critical conversation considers these characters only in relation to Archilde and, even then, too briefly or negatively. Witness how little ink has been spilt on Catharine and Elise La Rose, the latter of whom is dismissed in one phrase as “a wild breed girl” who has “hijacked” Archilde from a “heavenly course” (Owens 139)² or, worse—in my view—rather flippantly disregarded as “. . . a crudely-westernized woman, Elise, who has none of Catharine’s feelings of guilt and none of her emotional loyalty to ancient tribal values” (Evans 92).³

In spite of how instructive Owens’ and others’ work is, otherwise previous critical explorations are not immune to the negative representation of Native American women constructed by the first colonizers. Since the settlers first told tales of Pocahontas, the image of American Indian women has been skewed. Depicted as squaws, princesses, or heathens to be converted, they have been stereotyped, often at the cost of their former status within tribes. Paula Gunn Allen claims that the “colonizer’s image of Indian women has, more than any other factor, led to the high incidence of rape and abuse of Indian women by Indian men” (203). Allen rightfully laments the contrast between this assimilation of the colonizer’s dominance and the previous value, respect, and fear which accrued to femaleness in tribal institutions (212). Yet, for many American Indian women, according to Allen, “her destiny is necessarily that of her people, and her sense of herself as a woman is first and foremost prescribed by her tribe” (43). In his introduction to Mourning Dove’s Salishan autobiography, Jay Miller writes that “Plateau women were the recorders and conveyors of tradition” (xvxi).

This steadfastness to one’s cultural heritage obtains, to different degrees, with each of the three primary female Salish characters in McNickle’s novel. When Archilde returns from Oregon, Catharine, his mother, as per the Salish custom, wishes to plan a welcoming reunion, the feasting and storytelling during which mixed-blood Archilde, by contrast, disdains. She has a similar unappreciated devotion to her horse-stealing son, Louis, for whom she prays even as he cruelly manipulates her into sacrificing for his ungrateful self. According to Mourning Dove, women were the sustaining forces during hardship, “working hard and diligently out of love for their families and relatives” (Miller 69). Indeed, Catharine’s earlier dedication to her father had made her an obedient Catholic, so exemplary a convert the priests dubbed her “faithful Catharine.” Ironically this faith is baffled by the current world, especially her son Louis’s disrespect and her painful bewilderment at the “confusion and dread and emptiness” to which her life has devolved. But even at this dismal juncture in her life:

Archilde’s mother occupied a place of distinction in the tribe. She was the daughter of the chief Running Wolf who had welcomed the Fathers, and since the title was hereditary she was still of the chief’s family. More than that, she was a woman whose opinions were valued, and they were given only when sought. (61)

Admittedly, part of her prestige results from her status as a particular man’s daughter, but McNickle also alludes to her intrinsic worth and wisdom. And, significantly, it is an old-woman storyteller who retrieves Archilde from his condescending bemusement, irritation, and impatience at this feast: “Archilde had not intended to listen, yet he had heard every word. . . . It left a spark of gay remembrance in his mind” (66). This sensation and the aging Modeste’s bitter and simple story of the Salish struggle endear his mother to him who had heretofore shamed and embarrassed him, a mother whom he had, primarily, tolerated.

As we learn in Mourning Dove’s autobiography, in Salishan communities extended family play an integral role in rearing children, even as they became adults: “When a child was five or six, the old people in the home started the serious teaching, the etiquette of right and wrong. Instruction included legends and family history, tales of bravery, and tribal laws” (78). As a product of such a culture, Archilde cannot deny his mother’s only wish, also reminiscent of the old way: to go hunting before the first snowfall. Though from the Colville rather than Flathead band of Salish, Mourning Dove devotes a chapter to the importance of “Fall Hunting”: “when the chokecherry leaves were yellow and wilted, it was customary among all the Indians to go on an annual fall hunt arranged into groups of friends and families” (114). When Archilde realizes he cannot shoot due to an empathic connection to this powerless deer, he conjures a lame story for his mother about missing his shot, to which Catharine replies: “A young man waits for a better shot and hits nothing. An old man makes the best of it and gets his meat” (122). Here and elsewhere, she retrieves the oral tradition’s evocation of wise quips, and Archilde wittily responds in kind, having learned this quick skill from her.⁴

Catharine’s most pivotal act of resistance occurs after the racist game warden kills her son Louis. She becomes in an instant the decisive, instinctively avenging mother who strikes this overreacting officer with a hatchet, operating on the code of Indian justice. This is not surprising, given that other systems had failed her. To be sure, the mountainous map of her mind is perplexed at the injustice and lack of the promised reward

her Catholicism had trained her to anticipate.

The old lady labored in the depths of a mountain of thought. Her life came before her eyes to perplex and sadden her. A son is part of your body and when a son dies you have to ask yourself: How is it that I am still here? Why do they take only part of me? Of Louis, she remembered that when he was still small he was the swiftest runner of all his fellows. And then when he grew taller and began to ride a horse he was like a bird. In those days he never went far. If she should call he would be there. She knew his eyes. Then he went to school to the Fathers, and there was a change. She could not understand why it was. He rode wild horses. He rode at night singing songs. She never saw his eyes again. He called her "Old Woman." It was: "Old Woman, give me to eat," or "Old Woman, a man stole my horse. Give me a horse." And she would learn that he had gambled his horse away. He drew a knife on a man, ripped him open, and for that he was almost sent to prison. Then he stole horses. Now he was dead. She knew the Fathers had not done it, but it started after he went to school. She could not understand it. (130–31)

Catharine's existential angst combines with her grief to offer, ironically, her most succinct clarity regarding the futility of investing in white religion. She recalls further "how the Fathers had said . . . [they] would know great happiness" if they converted. Yet they had been obedient Catholics, and still to no avail: "—all that, and still the world grew no better" (131). The encroaching terrain of her despair is even more daunting when contrasted with the spitfire rebelliousness of her earlier motherhood. When her oldest sons were being tried for cattle thieving, she lied that their father Max was the instigator, willfully refused to speak English (her and their oppressor's language), and cunningly pretended she did not understand the sheriff, the interpreter, or the judge. She subverts a system contingent upon her submission, a system which otherwise would swallow her whole.

Chapter Nineteen is perhaps the most elucidating for mapping Catharine's mind, which it delineates from youth through adulthood to eventual deprogramming. Her initial confusion regarding the "Lady Black Robes" and their incessant cleaning bespeaks a larger philosophical gulf:

She had seen them wring a cloth of water and wash away the black footmarks where the carpenters had walked after a rain. These were curious activities. It seemed that you

could not live in a house as you lived outdoors or in a tepee. The outdoors cleansed themselves and so did a tepee. You moved it and the dirt fell out. Besides you did not mind a little dirt. (170)

Gradually at the Sisters' school, she learned to clean, craft, knit, and was exposed to a host of rural skills, etiquette, and literacy, yet she marvels at these odd curiosities. This skeptical and interrogating distance allows her to maintain the habits and customs of old, in spite of the wash tubs, needles, dishes, butter churn, and the stove that Max bought, perhaps in his own effort—intentional or otherwise—to "domesticate" her:

She looked at the furniture but never used it. The stove had been worn away by rust but not by use, because she went on cooking over a campfire. With every other new thing it was the same. The Sisters had taught her many arts but they had not quite taught her to be interested in using them. Possibly there was a deeper reason for her neglect, but on the surface that was what she felt. It was nice to do those things just to find out what they were like; but as for doing them every day until she died, that was just a nuisance. (171)

The "deeper reason" for rejecting these items, I would argue, is her loyalty to her own lifestyle and that of her ancestors. In retrospect, the narrator proffers, Catharine also regretted the coerced sedentary existence of being a white man's wife, forced to forfeit the more natural nomadic and fluid approach for the rigidity of clock-time and stagnant space. All of this, including the church, had failed her and her family miserably: "She had lost something. She was a pagan again. She who had been called Faithful Catharine and who had feared hell for her sons and for herself—her belief and her fear alike had died in her. It was difficult to face it, but it was true" (173). When she doesn't deem herself worthy of forgiveness for having killed a man, she ceases going to mass or confession, laments the pain of her life spent trying in vain to keep her sons in God's grace, and grows despondent: "She sat in her doorway all in a lump, looking as crushed and lifeless as last year's prairie grass. It was not quite the same. There was a spark in her which still responded to the wind of her thought, asking, 'What is to become of me? What have I done?'" (176). Her unrelenting introspection is a mark of her stamina and determination in the face of depressing odds. Slowly, these questions replace those of her vestigial Catholic impulse to find the redemptive possibilities in even the most bizarre and debilitating circumstances.

Significantly, it is only after this turning point that Archilde

recognizes her status and stature: “He saw then that she had a kind of importance which a stranger might never understand but which he, after missing it at first, had finally glimpsed” (182). And when he informs her of Max’s intended reconciliation, explaining that Max had left the house to her, he marveled at “how warmhearted his mother was, how easily she forgave” (183). Through his fond memories of her, though, we learn that he ought not to be surprised at her willingness to forget the past, given her nurturing capacities and loving ways.

Chapter Twenty-three is also enlightening, in this case regarding Catharine’s self-perception. Here she reveals to the elders of her tribe the events of the hunting trip and her reflections in its wake, as well as her poignant dream in which heaven is segregated and Indian heaven would not admit her until she “[gave] up [her] baptism” (209). Most revealing of the hard-bought wisdom informing her decision to abide by the old restitution for wrongdoing by having the “whip cover the fault” is her admission of the futility of imposed patriarchal religion:

If any of you think I’ve done wrong, it will do no good to say so. To me it is clear and I won’t go back. Only consider. For years I saw how the world was going. You knew my sons and how I prayed for them and tried to keep them from going to hell. It would have been better if they had been given the whip. Praying was not what was needed for them, and it does me no good. You have made this promise but tonight you ought to forget it. If you get into trouble over it, it will be nothing new. We have had trouble no matter what we do and we ought just to forget about it and live as it seems best. (210)

She becomes a spiritual advisor, suggesting that her tribe also rebuke the self-serving rules and patterns to which they had all been subjected. Indeed it is Catharine’s courage which inspires their own fortitude in reclaiming the spiritual and emotional territory to which Modeste’s niece had humbly returned: “. . . those old people turned back on the path they had come and for a while their hearts were lightened. The old lady, with the red stripes of the whip on her back, slept without dreaming” (211). She liberates herself and her people from the shackles which had fettered both their metaphoric and actual dreams.

Catharine and, by extension, the tribe’s healing legacy continues with the preparation for and enactment of the Indian Dance. This ritual is, for her, a coming home, a sacrament of the familiar/familial, as even the awe-struck Archilde begins to recognize:

Watching her, Archilde felt suddenly happy. She was pleased with her duties in the way that only an old art or an old way of life, long disused, can please the hand and the heart returning to it. She took up the folded garments of beaded buckskin and placed them on her grandchild in a kind of devotional act that derived satisfaction from minute observances; in a matter so simple, the least part has its significance or it is all meaningless. Narcisse submitted to her mood and to her ministering. (215)

She hereby orchestrates her grandson’s retrieval from the snare of a punitive and cruel belief system, refusing to allow its usurpation of yet another generation’s will and self-determination. Grandparents taught morality, will power, and concern for others through stories and example, according to Mourning Dove’s autobiography among other sources (35). In this intense observation, Archilde comes more fully to internalize the profound power inherent in his mother’s deeds, as he gradually adopts the map of her keen mind:

Archilde could see that for his mother this was a real thing, and he had felt the same way a moment before in Modeste’s lodge. For these old people it was real, almost real enough to make it seem like a spirit come from the grave. Watching his mother’s experienced hands, he could guess how she had lived, what she had thought about in her childhood. A great deal had happened since those hands were young, but in making them work in this way, in the way she had been taught, it was a little bit as if the intervening happenings had never been. He watched the hands move and thought these things. For a moment, almost, he was not an outsider, so close did he feel to those ministering hands. (215–16)⁵

She is the self-reliant spiritual guide who replenishes her kin by transferring the knowledge and experiences of not only her hands, but her mind, heart, and—at long last—self-possessed soul.

Wedded to his mother’s cartography, Archilde observes the impact of this ministry on Mike, which is even more remarkable in that it literally recuperates him from the damaging gloom the boarding school trauma inflicted on countless children: “For a moment he felt everything Mike felt—the rhythmic movement, the body’s delight in a sinuous thrusting of legs and arms, the wild music of drum and dancing bells, and best of all, the majesty of the dancers” (218). Catharine’s capacity as an instrument of restoration occurs, significantly, in a communal and

celebratory context which includes other instruments integral to tribal continuance.⁶

Notably, the males' recovery is literally and figuratively at the hands of the women and the culture that the saga of their difficult lives perseveres: "As Archilde sat in his mother's tepee he wondered at the expression of peace which had settled over her. From the depths of his own turmoil he looked upon her with searching eyes" (221). Catharine's womblike shelter actually and metaphorically grounds him in his roots, her space a refuge and her lingering presence, a solitudinous sanctuary.

This awakening is nonetheless troublesome for Archilde, as he feels oppressed by the burdens of his people's desolation in the face of severe drought, and powerless either to alleviate their misery or to intervene on their behalf, or to "fill the vacancy which their eyes opened on" (233). This overwhelming sense of pointlessness fuels the excruciating bay mare episode wherein he desperately tries to "help" a grotesque and starving horse that had clearly been harmed before. And even *after* Archilde realizes the chase could kill her, "he couldn't stop" himself from "show[ing] her kindness in spite of herself" (240). He needs to feel some sort of agency as he deludes himself that he can restore her. Yet she remains dejected throughout his efforts and "the tormentor becomes the tormented" (241). But it takes the merciful death of this bay mare at his own enraged and resentful hand for Archilde to confront the magnitude of the tragic irony their pathetic contest of wits represented.⁷ She defies his increasingly agitated attempts to feed and water her, as his "mission" has merely intensified her anguish and expedited her demise.

The pregnant symbolism of this ill-fated impetus toward salvation constitutes one of Archilde's harshest lessons. The mare wished to be left alone, much as did Mike and Narcisse, who set up camp in the woods for several weeks, and in frighteningly similar fashion to the way the Salish people desired to be left in peace. As Purdy contends of McNickle's novels in general, they "repeatedly proclaim, American Indians want only to be left alone to pursue their futures in their own ways. . . . when this basic human right is abrogated, bad things happen" (in *Heath* 1826). Importantly, I would proffer, it takes a female figure to defy the persistent impotence of the tormentor's misguided "kindness" which arrives, unbidden and oblivious, and in a striking parallel to Catharine's dying wish to reject—once and for all—the imposing spectre of Catholicism.

Indeed, the inevitability of a more devastating death than the mare's—his mother's—substantiates yet another powerful epiphany, particularly as Archilde gathers relatives and other tribal members to her bedside:

To young and old, the old lady was a real person. They let their voices fall in speaking of her, and Archilde looked at them curiously. He was continually surprised by evidence of the regard in which his mother was held. She was important to these people, she belonged to them almost more than she belonged to him. Only recently had he begun to claim her, and as yet he knew very little about her. (266–67)

In spite of the deep sorrow and pain which had infected Archilde, he is proud of his mother's rejection of those teachers with false promises; he redeems her death as a triumphant "resurrection of [her] spirit" (272). And Father Jerome's coercive, self-absorbed, and ethnocentric administration of Last Rites was as meaningless to and for Catharine as the crossbar, the *Somesh*, had become. Though Fr. Jerome does not heed them, Catharine's final wishes, which rebuke Catholicism's focus on sin, have—for herself and for the people in her life and death who really matter—the last word.

As with Catharine, albeit to a lesser degree, her daughter Agnes also possesses a quiet awareness to which the male characters aspire. For example, she perceptively voices early on what it will take the men a long time to understand: "Max will die. Somebody should keep this land and have cattle, like in old times" (15). She wishes to return to that previous era and even now observes its behavioral code, for example, that being 15 years her brother's senior gives her the privilege of speaking her mind. In one of her first conversations with Archilde, though he uses a scornful tone regarding his embittered attitude toward Max, Agnes "persisted," even when her voice became "fainter" as the only one in the family who tried to understand and even defend Max as "a good fellow" (16). She subscribes further to the old ways in her expectation that uncles (and aunts, which Elise later represents) would assume responsibility for caretaking the children, much as Modeste steps in to guide Archilde.⁸

Likewise, Agnes's *laissez-faire* attitude with her young sons, Mike and Narcisse, especially when her Spanish father Max needs them to work, represents a passive resistance to Eurocentric, patriarchal efforts to "domesticate" or tame them: "[Max] scowled. It was no good telling her to look for the boys. He started up the creek himself. He looked back and saw that Agnes had already gone into the house. It was none of her affair. He swore out loud" (77). In this cultural context, it is not surprising, thus, that when Max finally does find Mike and Narcisse, they are with Archilde, who is teaching them to fish and spear, old ways which captivate all their attention and concentration:

Archilde handled the spear and the boys watched closely. They would have to try it later and they didn't want to blunder and be laughed at. They were too engrossed in this occupation to see or hear anything. (77).

Regardless of the situation, it seems, Agnes quite contentedly ignores Max's demands, even though he had taken her in as his housekeeper when her husband was killed by a wild horse: "Agnes went about noiselessly in her moccasined feet and paid no attention to Max" (82).

Interestingly, then, we read Agnes's mind through her potent silences or through either Max or the narrator's cartographic lens. Max "had a mild affection for her" and appreciated "her stolid loyalty" (111), and later in the novel he regrets that his tricking of the boys he'd just "captured" for the mission school made her weep. Again Agnes's passive-aggressive stance holds fast to the old ways: "her silence was accusing"; and when he offers to take her to visit the boys in his car, she insists, "I'll go in the buggy" (112). Her tacit disapproval prompts Max's own remorse, and the narrator supplies what remains unspoken, though too loud and clear: "All summer long [Mike and Narcisse] had done nothing but ride the calves in the pasture, hunt and fish, and listen to their grandmother's stories. Now, all that free life had to end" (110). Agnes is painfully cognizant of the contrasting confinement and constriction/restriction these repressive boarding schools embody. She intuits and anticipates the abysmal consequences, dangers, and losses such a suffocating environment will incur.

As a carrier of the culture, Agnes is not alarmed when—after the Fourth of July dance which seemed to make her boys whole again—she assumes that they are "visiting" relatives, the modern-day translation of a formerly nomadic lifeway. McNickle embeds such historical adjustments of a dispossessed people throughout the narrative, e.g. when explaining the difficulties Agnes's mother faced as "a white man's wife":

In the old way of living one never stayed in one place for very long. One camped wherever there was game and grass and water for the horses. As a matter of fact, there were certain places where one always camped at the same time each season, unless for some reason game failed to appear in the usual way or a fire burned off the pasturage. When the old way came to an end and the Indians had to live on the Reservation, the habit of moving persisted; people went visiting. (172)

Clearly and understandably, Agnes does not wish to deprive her sons of

this culture-preserving modification. She prizes her sons but doesn't interfere with their freedom, sense of experimentation, or adventure. She has, through her tacit adherence to the old ways, unobtrusively spawned in Archilde the sense of responsibility which accrues to him both as an uncle and as a son. In Chapter Twenty-one, for instance, Archilde reaches the bedside of his distraught nephew "with his fists dug into his eyes, his knees drawn up, and his body rigid" (187) before Agnes does. With "Mike's head in his lap," Archilde tries to comfort him in the wake of his nightmare and bedwetting. Further, he "brought the boys into his room to share his bed. Then he went to see the old lady" (187). As his own uncle Modeste had nurtured him, "Archilde set about to discover what had happened" to Mike (188), inquiring of Mike and Narcisse's friends the occurrences at the mission school, where—readers learn to their horror—Mike had been excessively terrorized; such abuse was in stark and unconscionable contrast to the Salishan mode whereby, according to Mourning Dove, children seldom received punishment (Miller 11).

Agnes's expectation that her brother would step in becomes a positive self-fulfilling prophecy of a sort wherein we witness the parallels between her own and Catharine's child-rearing (i.e., the latter in Catharine's trust of Modeste's timely interventions with and for her son): "Archilde stayed close to the boys. He fashioned spears and sling shots and tried to make fishing and hunting as exciting as it used to be" (191). Archilde conveys through Narcisse, a conduit for Mike, thereby helping both his nephews, his liberation theology that the priest's tales about the devil are lies they should no longer allow to haunt them (192). And in his role as dedicated uncle, which Agnes has subtly fostered, Archilde realizes that "Something more than words was needed to lift Mike out of his" darkness (192). Fittingly, Archilde initiates the consultation with his uncle Modeste, who—to Archilde's heart's relief and mind's understanding—plans to assume a grandfatherly role to lead Mike back into the light, the modernist irony of Modeste's blindness further reinforcing the powerful symbolism:

"There will be a dance of the old times down on Buffalo Creek, below St. Xavier. I will go to this dance. As you know, I have been without eyes for a long time and you know how I go about. My grandchild walks in front, holding a thong, and I follow. Now, it will be a good thing if Mike comes to this dance, to hear of the old times and dance with us who lived in those days. If he wishes, and you let him, he shall take the place of my grandson and lead me by the string." . . . Archilde could see how it would be. Modeste occupied the situation of honor at all tribal gather-

ings, and this distinction was heightened by the unique place he occupied in the minds of all men, Indian and white, for his own character. Mike would be stirred by this, his pride would be awakened—if it were still alive. (199)⁹

Another parallel between Agnes and her mother resides in their resistance to keeping house in Anglo fashion. Similar to her mother's refusal to use the furniture Max bought,

Agnes kept no system in her household. Meals were cooked and eaten at all hours of the day and the night; she never knew beforehand how many would be present to partake of the food she offered. It might be only herself and the old lady, or it might be a small village of visiting relatives and friends. . . . Dishes were not a necessity. When there were not enough tin plates to go around one did very well with a piece of meat speared on the point of a knife. Food was the thing. (243)

Similarly, though Agnes does not keep tabs on her sons, they are “the thing”: they mean the world to her, as did Catharine's sons to her. The narrator suggests of Agnes: “Take them from her and you could take her life as well” (244). It is uncle Archilde who spends days looking for them and finds them in the deep woods, high in the mountain's foothills, drumming and dancing; Mike cured of his fear, both sure they would not again be deceived into returning to the Fathers. As in the days of old, Agnes trusts the universe that her boys will return home, though, when needed, which is in fact the outcome when she and her daughter Annie are wailing over Catharine's impending death. And, as was the case with Catharine's impact upon Archilde, it is the alteration in Agnes and Annie's grief soundings upon Archilde's entrance that alerts *him* to his own agency: “The changed voices insinuated something. It was as if he had been awaited, as if he were expected to show the others what was to be done” (257). Agnes's air of expectation prefaces Archilde's own pivotal realization which, importantly, is literally and figuratively interwoven with the women in his life. Observing them, he acknowledges:

People grew into each other, became intertwined, and life was no mere matter of existence, no mere flash of time. It was time that made the difference. The time that was consumed in moving one's feet along the earth, in learning the smell of coming snow, in enduring hunger and fear and the loss of pride; all that made a difference. And a still greater difference was this entangling of lives. People grew together like creeping vines. (258)

In addition to exemplifying this momentous convergence, Agnes is the one who tried most fully to emulate her mother, particularly in her continuance of the Salishan lifeway. She is the one who expressed both with and without words her appreciation of and love for her mother by tending to her needs joyfully or willingly. When Catharine first brought her belongings to Max's home after his burial, “Agnes, all in smiles, hurried to prepare a bed by the kitchen stove” (183). When her mother is distressed by her grandson's traumatization, Agnes marshals all sources of support to assuage her; she confers with Archilde: “‘The old lady shakes like a wet dog,’ Agnes whispered. ‘I sent Annie to her. The devil is after her she thinks. You must talk to her. My talk does her no good’” (187). Appropriate to her solid bond with her mother and her lifelong effort to honor her, thus, Agnes is also the one who accurately deciphers her mother's dying wish for Modeste and her last request “No priest!” which Archilde had previously misinterpreted as the opposite.

More premeditative and assertive in her efforts to intervene is Elise, the youngest of the three women and the one who has witnessed first-hand the decline of her grandfather Modeste's stature—which she attributes to the white envelopment she despises. Elise has lived and endured the usurpation which Norma Wilson articulates: “The material losses of Native Americans have been so extreme that they could have never been borne without a philosophy enabling them to look beyond these deprivations” (*Heath* 2732).

Such a philosophy motivates Elise and combines a *carpe diem* mentality which embraces fun, daring, and cunning, with a vision of a pleasurable, peaceful future without whites. Both factors are infused by McNickle's defiant response to the Allotment Acts of 1887 and 1904 and their disastrous effects, intended to eradicate Indianness. Elise's spiritedness, however, refuses to be annihilated or diminished. When Archilde first meets her after consulting Modeste, about ritual healing for Mike, this feistiness is the most salient of Elise's qualities. It surfaces much later in the novel as she becomes the first person—man, woman, or child—to urge Archilde to enjoy himself. She is both savvy and streetwise and lives according to her own rules and rhythms. Much like the boys after their return to wholeness, and specifically Mike in his self-initiated purging of his scapular's deadly grip, Elise does not subscribe to white rules and the accompanying priestly notions of “sin.” She practices the philosophy of soaring unfettered which Archilde had as yet only theorized in his effort to deprogram his nephews of the doctrine of evil the mission school had inculcated. A relative novice at romance and fun, Archilde's inexperience

with women and liquor, on the other hand, incurs a fight at a dance where he is sorely outnumbered.

Perhaps it is McNickle's modernist attention to structure (e.g., Archilde guides Catharine down the mountain after she kills the game warden and sinks into a stupor of grief over Louis, much as Elise leads a bereaved Archilde into the mountains when he is dazed by his own monumental loss), rather than mere coincidence that—just as the Fourth of July tribal dance at Buffalo Creek becomes the point of independence for the boys—it also precipitates a turning point for Archilde when he attends a social dance with Elise later that same day. Indeed, when she first insists that he “take [her] to the dance” (223), readers sense McNickle's conflation of the two events and obvious mixing of opposite intentions: “He was puzzled. ‘The dance is over.’ ‘Oh, hell! Not the Indian dance. That makes me sick. I mean the regular dance at the Hall.’ He had no desire to go there. He had been on his way home” (223). In stark contrast to the “unaccountable security . . . [which] was his necessity, for the first time” (222) after the Indian dance, the dance in Farmer's Hall “repelled him” and he “did not take easily” to it (224). And the old women who attend this dance are gossips, debating how long it will take for Archilde to be completely lost, a failure, a waste; they condemn Elise as promiscuous, unlike the female elders at the Indian dance who do everything in their power to assure the strength and recovery of the youths in their charge. Archilde's own musicianship and aspirations of becoming a genuine violinist make him resent the raspy sound of the harsh fiddle music, which poses another contrast to the earlier dance. Further, Archilde observes:

The Indians at least, when they went to dance, were reliving an old way of life and they tried to put themselves in the right mood. They dressed themselves in ways that had special significance, and there were symbols and gestures of various meanings. But for these people there was nothing. (225)

His disdain for these dance-goers, coupled with the intoxicating effect of both Elise's liberating laughter and the liquor she suggests they drink as a way of loosening Archilde from the tension of Dave Quigley's hateful spectre, culminate in a self-defensive reaction to the man who grabs him, a response similar to Catharine's fateful wielding of the hatchet:

[Archilde] seemed to keep his eyes on Elise all the time, but his aim was perfect. He freed his arm from her waist and in the same motion swung it to one side and upward. He

caught the heavy-set man on the chin and with such stunning effect that he went down without moving an arm. (229)

Elise tries to defend Archilde physically, and then verbally defies his assailants: she “wished them all in vitriolic hell” (230). She even has the wherewithal to transport him to the car and safely home.

In addition to Elise's influence, the impoverished and decrepit, blind and deaf, female elder, whom Archilde addresses as “Grandmother” (234), and the defiant bay mare, in the two chapters following the dance, respectively, force Archilde to reckon with his own fears. Only after significant interactions with each of these female figures is he able to declare his own independence from the fear Modeste equates with illness: “Whatever happened, he was not afraid” (236). Like Mike, after all these agonized reckonings and with the curing guidance of his uncle and the women in his life, Archilde regains his psychic and, by implication, spiritual health.

In part because of his consciousness of Elise's part in his self-realization, Archilde and—judging by his careful phrasing—McNickle, more so than the critical discourse, appreciate Elise's positive attributes.¹⁰ “She meant no harm” (249), but liked excitement. She is good-natured, easy-going, quick-minded, kind-hearted, “generous” (250), affectionate, yet strong. She “never cared what they did, just so they didn't work hard or never had to live by rules” (252). She is the only character in the book who listens to Archilde's ambitions, which she tries, like Max—and also in a fumbling way—to support. When he reveals future plans, she replies:

“Hell!” She could express a good deal in a short word like that. “I been wanting to tell you, but you could of said it wasn't my business. Well, people around her was saying you'd blow yourself before long. I knew you wouldn't, but I thought I ought to tell you so now you've made up your mind—that's fine! That's good! Cripes! I can't make it sound like I should, but you know me—I feel lots more'n I say!” (253)

Archilde has a gold-mine here, and he finally sees it fully. Fortunately, even if few others do, at least Archilde recognizes Elise's worth, and her presence warms him: “when he kissed her, as they got up to leave, he felt that he had just come to know a wonderful person. He said nothing about that, he couldn't just then, but it was a strong, shaking thing to feel” (254). Her encouragement facilitates his decisiveness and enables him to consider his own potential: “He could tell himself” as he stood there, not only listening but seeing, that of all joys, there was none like that of

capturing the future in a vision and holding it lovingly to the eye. There was deep pleasure in that" (255). Archilde wisely internalizes the strength and perspective the women around him exhibit. In a sense, their minds map his.

In Archilde's most dire hour, when his mother is dying, Elise insists on staying with him, and her protective impulse comes to the fore as she senses the danger in Archilde's self-incriminating plan to explain all to the agent before his mother dies. After Archilde is undone by his mother's approaching death and the cold-hearted Father Jerome's insistence that he "come clean" regarding what transpired with the game warden, Elise is clear-headed in her reflection:

It was all very well to resent a priest's interference, but getting yourself put in jail just to spite him was, in her mind, not sensible. Better let the priest have his say and forget him. (267)

Like Catharine and Agnes, Elise follows the pre-priest rules and responsibilities which prioritize familial and tribal obligations over white man's law, be it religious or state-issued. Elise is reasoned, not malicious or self-serving, in her responses. She becomes Archilde's shadow, one whose constancy he could rely upon and whose care made *him* "inwardly glad" (271). Her attentiveness and practicality make possible their escape, of which—in the stupor of his grief and confusion—he was unaware: "During those days in the mountains Elise made camp, looked after the horses, cooked food—did everything in fact" (284). Elise buys them considerable time through her wits, "backtracking and circling to throw off pursuit" (285). She is practical in other ways of knowing and surviving as McNickle indicates earlier in the novel: "To some people nothing is ever hidden and they live by habit in a world beneath the surface of things which most people never suspect even exists" (226). Not surprisingly, then, the men, including Mike and Narcisse, seem to tag along in the mountains indifferently for the ride. Elise, though, is completely devoted to Archilde and his desire, and tries to dissuade him from turning himself in, once he becomes aware of what has happened, by impressing upon him her notion of Indian justice:

Look at it my way. You had nothing to do with this business. You just happened to be there. That don't oblige you to go out of your way to tell people something they don't have to know. And—wait now. More than that, if you go and tell this story they'll do their god-damndest—you see—to stick you for it. They'll say why did you tell a lie about

it? Why did you keep quiet about it? Oh—piss on 'em! Look—no. Now let me give you my idea. All you have to do is go away. (288)

In Elise's worldview, much as with Catharine's earlier, her decisive, almost instinctive, shooting of the hateful, snakelike Sheriff Quigley is an act of self (and tribal) defense. The purity of her heart in the intention of preserving her lover, and her firm resolve to overcome this cruel authoritarian figure and the obstacles he sadistically thrusts in their path from Sniél-emen to freedom, resounded with each shot to Quigley's black heart. McNickle's novel shows us that it may be difficult to resist the forces of change brought about by whites. At the same time, Indians cannot be coerced into accepting these shifts. Here again, tribal will rests in the existing traditions and values which the women uphold and perpetuate.

The females' actions—including those of the bay mare—are central to survivance: survival and resistance. If "[l]oss of independent action equals cultural death," as James Ruppert claims (187), and the only agents of independent action are the women in the novel, as I contend, they are the ones who stave off cultural murder as well as cultural suicide. This is not surprising, considering their function as culture-bearers and preservers, and given the sociocultural expectation that they will facilitate conflict intervention, as Paula Gunn Allen has argued. Their protectiveness in this capacity understandably extends to their men, about and over whom they assume a defensive, almost Amazonian stance. In my view, they are the ones who underscore, to borrow Purdy's phrasing, "a consistent reaffirmation in modern times of Native values and beliefs" (Heath 1826). What Purdy refers to as Archilde's re-initiation into Salish culture, would not be possible without these women.

The qualities and motivations noted herein inform the map of the female mind, the specific gendered geography having eluded the original configuration of the term coined for the cultural frameworks of values, beliefs, modes and vehicles of expression by which one constructs and perceives the world and one's place in it. This discussion delivers, I hope, a perhaps long overdue cartographic innovation to enlarge understanding through analysis of what Catharine, Agnes, Elise, and—on a disturbingly figurative level—the bay mare have to teach us about remapping the contours of cross-cultural, cross-generational conflict and the resolutions women engender.

NOTES

¹For a compelling analysis of Wolfgang Iser's theories of reading and readers as they inform this text, see James Ruppert's fascinating chapter in Gerald Vizenor's *Narrative Chance*: "Textual Perspectives and the Reader in *The Surrounded*," pp. 91–100.

²Even when one concedes the centrality of the women characters as LaVonne Ruoff does in her elucidating historical overview, "Old Traditions and New Forms," they are cast as impediments to Archilde's mobility: the "female characters are central to the plot because their actions make it impossible for Archilde to leave the reservation" (165). I am thankful to LaVonne for introducing me to D'Arcy McNickle's work and her support of my feminist approach to it during the 1994 National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Seminar in American Indian Oral Cultures and Literatures.

³Though Charles Larson concedes that "the women [are] the true activists in the novel," he indicates that as such they make Archilde the victim of circumstances (in Fleck, 89).

⁴For a fuller discussion of the novel's multiple ironies surrounding the hunt, see Robert Gish's "Irony of Consent: Hunting and Heroism in D'Arcy McNickle's *The Surrounded*," chapter six in Purdy's *The Legacy* collection.

⁵Though in a different season, Mourning Dove devotes a chapter to the significance of "Winter Dancing" for the Salish people: "To be successful, a person had to have power from a spirit. This spirit came close to its human partner every winter, and their bond had to be expressed at a public gathering where individuals sang the songs that had been given to them at the first contact with the spirit" (*A Salishan Autobiography* 123).

⁶For a thorough exploration of the dance's pivotal significance, as well as the profound revelations of Catharine's dream, see Purdy, *Word Ways* 64–71.

⁷Also compelling is the relationship between what the arrival of the horse represented and enabled, both for the Salish people in general and, indirectly, for women in particular:

The horse greatly increased the Indians' mobility. The adoption of guns and the trappings of equestrian nomadism gave some eastern Plateau tribes the look of Plains Indians, on horseback in the feather headdresses and beaded buckskins of popular media image. Some groups, like the Sanpoils and Nespelems, kept their Plateau orientation and acquired only a few horses; others, like the Columbians, used large horse herds to hunt bison in the Northern Plains and developed a growing confederacy to protect these interests. While men were away, women, particularly senior ones, took on more responsibilities, and their social, domestic, and political importance grew as groups of males took long trips to the Plains to hunt bison. (Miller xxviii).

See also Ross.

⁸For a stimulating and convincing discussion of the Salish tradition regarding the bond between uncles and nephews, see Purdy's *Word Ways*, especially pp. 63ff.

⁹Mourning Dove's experience also attests to the agency of aunts and uncles in Salish culture. She contracted pneumonia and inflammatory rheumatism at about the age of 30 and was near death when her aunt "doctored her with herbs and native treatments" and thereby secured her recovery (Miller xx).

¹⁰I am grateful to Larson for noting in an entire paragraph Elise's strength and heroism, which he parallels to Catharine's; see his "The Surrounded" in *Critical Perspectives on Native American Fiction*, pp. 91–92.

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FORUM

From the Editor

I would like to take this opportunity to bid farewell publicly to Robert Nelson who, for these long years, has been instrumental in the life of this journal. As Production Editor, Bob has been a blessing. Over the years, he has demonstrated, again and again, his devotion to our association; he is a true professional who has worked diligently, as the phrase goes, “through thick and thin.” At one point, over many difficult months, he carried all the duties of editor, as well as those of the Association’s Treasurer (which he has agreed to continue). If not for him, this journal would no longer exist. I believe that I speak for us all when I wish him the best in the future, and say that we shall surely miss his cordial management and ready energy.

A Note from ASAIL’s President

As 1998 dawns, I want to share a few reflections with you about ASAIL’s accomplishments as well as our new projects for the future. It has truly been an honor to serve as ASAIL President for the past two years and it is with excitement that I look forward to our new directions under the leadership of Ginny Carney (Cherokee), President 1998–1999, and our other executive officers.

Recently ASAIL ran a joint business meeting with the MLA Division of American Indian Literatures at the 1997 MLA Convention in Toronto. ASAIL also hosted a well-attended open reading by renowned Cherokee writer Thomas King.

At the Toronto meeting, Alanna Brown (Chair of the Executive Committee of the Division of AIL) and I worked through a lengthy agenda that included a review of the ASAIL Treasurer's report. Robert Nelson, our long-time Treasurer, has consistently kept our organization "in the black" and is to be commended for his thoroughness and careful attention to detail.

During this meeting we acknowledged with happiness that Scott Manning Stevens (Mohawk) has taken over the editorship of *ASAIL Notes* and resumed printing with 14.3 (December 1997), with the sponsorship of the new American Indian Studies Department of Arizona State University. We are grateful for their assistance and thank him for bringing us current announcements in a timely fashion once again. He is providing a great service to our field.

At present our Association has nearly 400 members, including more than fifty members overseas. Many other individuals and institutions, including tribal colleges, receive *ASAIL Notes* with our compliments. Paid subscribers, of course, receive our journal *SAIL*, as well as *ASAIL Notes*. Most of these membership monies go towards the production and distribution of the journal.

ASAIL Treasurer Robert Nelson was re-elected for another two year term, and Kenneth Roemer was elected as Vice President for a one year term. Ruth Rosenberg remains in her position as Secretary for 1998. James Ruppert was elected prior to the meeting as a Special Delegate to the MLA Delegate Assembly. And it was announced that ASAIL is still looking for an able editor to take over the journal, and to that end, we have considered forming an affiliation with a press to provide some of the production duties. A few university presses have expressed interest in assisting us in printing and distribution of *SAIL*, but, after considerable debate, we decided that we should get more information on them before committing to this possible involvement.

ASAIL will sponsor two sessions at the American Literature Association Conference in May 1998 in San Diego and two sessions at the 1998 Modern Language Association Convention in San Francisco in late December. One MLA session will be "Indigenous Texts in Colonial and Post-Colonial Contexts," chaired by Chadwick Allen and the second session is the "Indigenous Feminisms: Native American Women Writers," chaired by Susan Brill. Additional sessions on teaching Native American

Literature, a reading by Native Women Poets, and on the work of William Apress will be sponsored by the AIL Division. In order to keep track of our own history, such as session titles and presenters, we may one day create an ASAIL repository/library that would house video footage of performances and readings, along with reams of paper.

In the future ASAIL may endeavor to become active in the world of public radio. Recently, *Storylines America*, sponsored by the American Library Association and funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, hosted regional writers radio programs that engaged the general public in discussions of the works of Momaday, Silko, Harjo, and McNickle, among others. Guests on these programs included Paula Gunn Allen, Alanna Brown, Robert Gish, Janice Gould, Jarold Ramsey, Greg Sarris, and Susan Scarberry-García. Several of the featured authors were also on live or taped for the show. ASAIL could perhaps sponsor on-air conversations among several Native writers, to be broadcast nationwide, even beyond the Southwest and Northwest where these *Storylines* events were aired.

Other miscellaneous discussions at MLA centered around the possibility of us sponsoring our very own ASAIL conference. There was considerable enthusiasm for this proposal.

Lastly, as I close, saying good-bye but not a farewell, I want to thank those who have strengthened our organization ASAIL tremendously and selflessly. John Purdy, *SAIL* Editor, has always been there for me, ever patient and humorous. Recent *SAIL* issues, such as our dynamic twenty-year retrospective (9.3), framed by Kay Sands and LaVonne Brown Ruoff's eloquent essays, is a real collector's item, as is 9.4, a tribute to the creative work of Sherman Alexie. And I owe a special heartfelt thank you to Kate Shanley who, as my predecessor in this position, gave me invaluable advice and the "back story" that I needed to know. So from my desk at Navajo Preparatory School I say Ahe'hee': thank you very much for all of the help over the last two years. I look forward to working more with all of you, including scholars overseas, who are keeping the faith, keeping ASAIL afloat in beauty.

Susan Scarberry-García
ASAIL President, 1996-1997

Calls for Papers

MLA, San Francisco 1998

Division: American Indian Literatures

Session Title: "Teaching American Indian Literatures in Multiethnic Contexts": Accepting proposals for papers on situating American Indian literatures in courses such as Women's Studies, Ethnic Studies, Introduction to Literature, Regional Literatures, "American" Literature, Post-colonial Literatures, etc.

Type of submissions preferred: One-page submittal

Deadline for responses: March 1

Contact information:

Malea Powell
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356 Bachelor Hall
Miami University
Oxford, OH 45056
MDPOWELL@MIAVX1.ACS.MUOHIO.EDU

ASAIL Sessions

I. Session Title: "Indigenous Texts in Colonial and Post-Colonial Contexts": Comparative and/or theoretical analysis of indigenous texts (American Indian, Maori, Aboriginal, etc.) engaging issues of coloniality/post-coloniality, transnational feminisms, hybridity, "indigenous" theory, etc.

Type of Submissions Preferred: Eight-ten page paper, or two-page abstract

Deadline: 1 Mar 1998

Contact Information:

Chadwick Allen
Department of English
Ohio State University
Columbus, OH 43210
ALLEN.559@OSU.EDU

II. Session Title: "Indigenous Feminisms: Native Women Writers":

Tribally centered (rather than Eurocentrically informed) critical approaches to the work of American Indian, Canadian First Nation, and Alaska Native women writers. Attention to contemporary West Coast Native women writers is especially invited.

Type of Submissions Preferred: Eight-ten page paper or two-page abstract

Deadline: 1 March 1998

Contact Information:

Susan B. Brill
Department of English
Bradley University
Peoria, IL 61625
BRILL@BRADLEY.EDU

SAIL Special Issue

We intend to publish a special issue of *SAIL* that will focus on Native American literary works for young people. Lisa Mitten has agreed to guest edit the issue. Over the last few years, the number of books published has increased dramatically, with well known literary artists producing texts for a younger audience, so it is time to turn our attention to this area of publication again. We invite critical studies, as well as reviews and review essays that examine recent works of literature. Moreover, we have received several recently published books and are seeking reviewers for them. So, if any of our readers are interested in contributing an essay, please contact Lisa Mitten at:

Lisa Mitten
Social Sciences Bibliographer
207 Hillman Library
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Or, if interested in submitting an essay and/or reviewing a book or books, please contact me: John Purdy, Editor.

Approaches to Louise Erdrich

MLA is publishing a new volume in their *Approaches To* series focusing on the works of Louise Erdrich. The editors of the volume, Jim Giles, Connie Jacobs, and Greg Sarris, invite you to help us by responding to a brief questionnaire and by submitting chapter proposals. You can obtain further information on this important project by contacting Sonia Kane at MLA: (212) 614-6355 or e-mail SONIA.KANE@MLA.ORG.

Native Writers Project Begins

A new project is underway at the American Native Press Archives that will change the way students and scholars approach the study of Native writers and writing. Dubbed the Native American Writers Archival Project, it seeks to bring various materials to researchers via the World Wide Web.

The project began this fall with new personnel coming on board. Mike Jasinski and Jane-Ellen Murphy, graduate assistants, are working with the project director on Phase One of the project, a Bibliography of Native American Writers, 1772-present. Kyle Edmonson, a student intern in the American Native Press Archives, is assisting in compiling and editing bibliographic entries.

For the purposes of this project, we are defining the term "Native American Writing" very broadly and are including, along with fiction and poetry, a large body of other works, such as journalism; scientific and technical writing; critical and historical essays; biographies, autobiographies, and personal interviews.

Plans are to produce by August, 1998, a web-site on which the first stage of the bibliography will be accessible to all and to which subsequent bibliography will be added. The site will also house a search engine that will allow researchers to approach the database in a great number of ways. For example, the citations will be available by time frames, tribes, regions, and authors' names. In addition, citations may be identified by topics, sub-topics, and combinations of topics.

We are trying to make the database user friendly, as the computer gremlins say, but at the same time we want researchers to be as creative as they wish. Thus, researchers will be able to identify writers by tribe during a particular time period; they will be able to compile bibliographies of works by and about specific writers; and they will be able to conduct inquiries into specialized topics, the curricula used in off-reservation boarding schools during the Great Depression, for example, or oil and gas leases on Native lands in the 1920s.

At present, Jasinski and Murphy are entering data using bibliographic software that allows for useful manipulation of the data. Entries include the basic citation in addition to other identifiers, keywords, and annotations. A large body of data from 1772 to 1924 is already in the database and is currently undergoing testing. The test sample contains 4100 entries by some 1000 writers representing 115 tribes or nations. At the same time, we are preparing two other large blocks—1925-1960 and 1961-present—for inclusion.

When we go on line in August, 1998, we anticipate doing so with entries that span the period from colonial times through 1924. The total number of entries we estimate at around 10,000, representing the work of some 2500 writers from 190 tribes. A few months later, we will add the period 1925 through 1945, with an additional 10,000 entries to bring the total to around 20,000.

After that, we really get down to business with the bibliography of Native American writing from 1945 to the present. We have no estimates about the size of this part of the data file, except to say that this portion of the bibliography will dwarf the others.

One additional feature that we think will prove valuable is that the bibliography will not be closed, i.e., we will keep adding to it indefinitely and, we hope, keep improving it. With that in mind, we will ask users to submit citations for works that do not appear and ask writers to furnish citations for their own writing.

Phase Two of the project will make curriculum materials available on the web site. Teachers from kindergarten through university level will be able to retrieve teaching materials from the site itself and from links the

site provides. We hope to put teachers in touch with locations on the web that specialize in Native materials such as the Wordcraft Circle of Native Writers and Storytellers site and those of tribal colleges and other educational facilities such as the Cherokee Cultural Center.

In addition, scholars from the University of Arkansas at Little Rock and other institutions will be encouraged to develop teaching materials using the resources of the American Native Press Archives. As they are developed, these aids will be made available for retrieval from our web site and should demonstrate, beyond their intrinsic value, the possibilities of archives-based teaching.

Phase Three is the section of the project that will put on line some hard-to-access texts, photographs, maps, and other items, mainly from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Examples might be the out-of-print poetry of John Rollin Ridge; fugitive pieces by Alex Posey; the works of Creek writer Charles Gibson, whose works appeared in scarce Indian Territory publications; or the short stories of Cherokee Ora V. Eddleman.

Eventually, other phases of the Native American Writers Archival Project will come on line. These include an electronic file on contemporary Native American writing, including the works of members of the Wordcraft Circle of Native Writers and Storytellers and other Native authors. These works will appear as text, as videos, and as audio recordings.

Another phase will feature texts, audio recordings, and videos in Native American journalism, documenting notable events in Native journalism and broadcasting. Members of the Native American Journalists Association will be asked to submit materials as will other Native print and electronic journalists.

Finally, we envision a second electronic bibliography that will include citations and annotations of scholarly writing and secondary sources in Native American literature. This is an area of scholarship that has been mushrooming in the recent past and is one, we feel, that will take on increasing importance. In compiling and making available these materials, we will follow the philosophy and format of Phase One. We invite comments and suggestions for the project. Please write to the project director:

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REVIEW ESSAYS

Urban Survivor Stories: The Poetry of Chrystos

Victoria Brehm

Because of her range of forms and subjects, Chrystos, whose pseudonym is a conflation of the Greek words for “Christ” and “gold,” is often anthologized piecemeal: as an American Indian protest poet, as a Lesbian, as an apologist for the underclass and discriminated against of any race other than white, as an environmentalist. Seldom are her poems considered as an *oeuvre*; partly because of the polarization of critical theory, partly because Chrystos’s work is so unlike academically acceptable poetry, she resists complacent critical investigation. She is too angry, too openly sexual, too invested in a political agenda.

Traditionally readers are trained to expect poetry to be composed of “emotion recollected in tranquillity,” and Chrystos is never tranquil. For that reason she is valuable in the classroom, since students—who don’t generally understand “emotion recollected in tranquillity” and its corresponding complexity of form—respond immediately to the unmediated emotion in her poems. Chrystos declares she writes for people who “don’t generally like poetry but I like yours,” a warning for professors and the unexamined subtexts of canonical gatekeeping. Mark Twain, for a number of reasons, would have understood Chrystos.

She was born in San Francisco in 1946 to a Menominee (or part Menominee) father and a mother of European ancestry. She does not appear to be an enrolled member of any tribe, although non-enrollment may be a function of Menominee recognition/non-recognition issues, or her desire to preserve her pseudonym for political purposes, or her wish to protect herself from investigation of what may be a criminal record. She aligns herself completely with her Indian heritage and does not

confront mixed-blood issues although she is obviously mixed-blood, perhaps because she was sexually abused by her mother's brother for many years. This embracing of her father's ethnic heritage and rejection of her mother's, as indeed, she often rejects white people in general, is a stance for which she has been, not surprisingly, criticized. Despite her preference for American Indian cultures, however, she refuses to incorporate traditional Menominee literature in her poetry because, as she wrote in the preface to her first book, *Not Vanishing*, "Our rituals, stories & religious practices have been stolen & abused, as has our land. I don't publish work which would encourage this—so you will find no creation myths here. My purpose is to make it as clear [and] as inescapable as possible, what the actual, material conditions of our lives are" (*Not Vanishing* "Forward"). There are no sacred white bears with copper tails riding the buses in Los Angeles, and Chrystos forces readers to relinquish their fantasies of what American Indians should be.

To date, she has published five books of poetry: *Not Vanishing* (1988), *Dream On* (1991), *In Her I Am* (1993), *Fugitive Colors* (1995), and *Fire Power* (1995). Her work is frequently included in Gay/Lesbian, American Indian, and multi-cultural anthologies, and she is often discussed in scholarly articles with other AI women poets such as Wendy Rose, Beth Brant, and Linda Hogan. She has yet, unfortunately, to receive the sustained critical attention given to other AI poets who are less openly confrontational, less angry about discrimination, and more reserved about their sexuality. The reason is because Chrystos is the AI answer to Madonna: a singular pseudonymous artist whose project is to shock us out of our complacency.

On the surface, much of her poetry would seem to conform to what has been defined as the predictable, institutionalized, "writer's workshop" production: short lyrics in a distinctive voice that focus on personal experience (McAdams 8). The poems that have been anthologized or quoted in AI critical studies, such a recent study of AI women poets' "rage and hope" in *Signs*, add politics to this definition but conform to the other constraints (Gould 797–99), which says more about the critics than the poet. Even Lesbian/Gay/Bi anthologies such as *Living the Spirit*, or anthologies about domestic violence, such as *Naming the Violence*, choose AI politicized poems or poems such as "What Did He Hit You With? The Doctor Said," about Lesbian battering (Roscoe; Lobel).

What is missing from the criticism and anthologizing is a recognition of Chrystos's radically distinctive voice: passionate, bloody, mocking, and angry, but equally sensual, whimsical, and seductive, a voice unlike any other in American poetry at present: the voice of the Lesbian,

underclass urban AI survivor engaged in what can best be described as verbal terrorism. Chrystos is Dorothy Allison with an Attitude.

Certainly Chrystos is capable of writing in traditionally beautiful ways. For example, consider this haiku with a characteristically run-in title: "A Valentine / to the heron huddled in the cold rain / whose soft dark ash gray shape / with head tucked / opened my heart / like lace" (*Fire Power* [np]). But she usually writes in a graphically confrontational style that can leave readers gasping. Violence readers can handle, saturated as the culture has become with violence, and knowing that it is all a movie or a TV show. Violence is not reality for most; it is entertainment, usually visual, and viewers can look away, or think they can. While openly erotic sexuality and anger are harder to dismiss, still these concerns can be finessed. Openly confrontational class antagonism—refusing to allow readers to be cultural cosmopolitanites despite their good intentions—is hardest to ignore. And Chrystos allows no subterfuge.

Few readers are autodidacts, as the poet declares herself to be. Indeed, professors are in the business of ensuring that doesn't happen. Fewer still are from the underclass, or have been drug addicts, prostitutes, sexually-abused children, or suicidally insane: all situations Chrystos explores in detail. Readers can accept the pain of other poets of the so-called "confessional school" because they seldom put the onus for their plights on us. Chrystos, because of her numerous poems on racism, allows us no such easy escape. "I assert that poetry without politics is narcissistic & not useful to us," she writes at the end of *Fire Power*. "I also believe that everything is political—there is no neutral, safe place we can hide out in waiting for the brutality to go away" (*Fire Power* "Gathering Words" [np]).

At times Chrystos appears to have embarked on a one-woman crusade to confront readers with the implications of their cultural cosmopolitanism and to deny any comfortable, distancing delusions of pity for the "oppressed": prostitutes, street people, drug addicts, and those who beg money at subway stations. She scorns the complacent handout, the upper middle class comforts of religion, money, consumerism, and economic security. In the "cleaning lady poems," which are reminiscent of both Langston Hughes's "Madam" poems and Yeats's "Crazy Jane" poems, Chrystos gives a graphic picture of what it means to be lower class. While sometimes these poems descend into maudlin self-pity and reverse racism, readers who have known poverty while working for upper-middle class and wealthy people can empathize with the poet's anger and frustration in "Wings of A Wild Goose," one of her early statements on class: "A hen, one who could have brought more geese, a

female, a wild one / dead / Shot by an excited ignorant young blond boy,
 his first / His mother threw the wings in the garbage I rinsed them /
 brought them home, hung them spread wide on my studio wall / A
 reminder of so much, saving what I can't bear to be wasted / Wings / I
 dream of wings which carry me far above human bitterness / human walls
 He has a lawn this boy / A pretty face which was recently paid /
 thousands of dollars to be in a television commercial I clean / their house
 / every Wednesday morning / 2 dogs no one brushes . . . / A black rabbit
 who is almost always out of / water usually in a filthy cage . . . / This
 family of three lives / on a five acre farm They raise no crops not even
 their own / vegetables or animals for slaughter His father is a neurosur-
 geon / who longs to be a poet His mother frantically searches / for
 christian enlightenment I'm sad for her though I don't like / her because
 I know she won't find any The boy does nothing / around the house to
 help without being paid I'm 38 & and still / haven't saved the amount of
 money he has in a passbook found / in the pillows of the couch under the
 gum wrappers . . . I could explain to [his mother] that meat raised / for
 slaughter is very different than meat taken from the woods / where so few
 wild beings survive That her ancestors are / responsible for the emptiness
 of this land That lawns feed no / one . . . That spirituality / is not separate
 from food or wildness or respect or giving / But she already doesn't like
 me because she suspects me / of reading her husband's poetry books when
 no one around / & she's right. . . . I need the 32 dollars a week tolerating
 / them provides me I wait for the wings on my wall to speak to me / guide
 my hungers teach me winds I can't reach I keep / these wings because
 walls are so hard wildness so rare . . ." (*Not Vanishing* 34–45).

But just when readers start suffering from compassion or fatigue, or become bored by yet-another autobiographical self-indulgence in victimization, Chrystos mocks her own self-pity and righteousness. In "Interview," her offer to give a bag lady some of her poems and take her home is soundly repulsed when the subject of her charity declares "Books don't make any sense. I'll take a baloney sandwich instead" (*Fugitive Colors* [np]). Food, in the universe Chrystos forces her readers to experience, matters more than poetry, an orientation of priorities most readers cannot understand but which the poet insists is critical.

In "For The Trees" this poet, celebrated as an environmentalist, discovers midway through a poem reviling logging that "I couldn't live simply in the gentle ways of my ancestors / I don't want to spend all day / gathering food / preparing it / making clothing against the cold / I like to draw my visions with prisma colors / & paints from a tube / Use fountain pens, books, stereo / electric blankets on frosty nights / I'm as

much to blame as the buzz saw . . . I didn't start out / to see myself reflected in its blade . . ." (*Fire Power* [np]).

Chrystos can also be mordantly funny, puncturing hypocrisy (her own included) in prose poems, such as "ITCOTU," which mock academic/anthropological discourse.

This dangerous disease, whose anagram stands for *I'm The Center Of The Universe*, was formerly restricted almost exclusively to the Euro-immigrant classes but has now made appalling forays into all levels of civilized tribes. . . . While it is more frequently seen in members of the male sex, it has unfortunately also made inroads into the female sex, including many Lesbians, whom one would expect to know better.

There are a number of conditions which make the underlying disease evident—among these are: inability to listen to others for longer than 3 minutes; the false concept that one's own ideas are superior to all others; the pitiful belief that control of others is paramount to one's own sanity; and a particularly debilitating form of verbal diarrhea in which the patient cannot seem to shut up. This researcher is consistently fighting evidence of this disease in herself, not always successfully (*Fire Power* [np]).

Chrystos is, as it were, writing back from a region, sending a letter to those readers who would make of American Indian cultures, of the cultures of poverty, of Lesbianism, a new local-color literature which they can then co-opt, and her letter contains the blunt message that she will not allow anyone to use her life and the lives of those she knows for politically-correct cultural capital. She insists readers recognize that the current fascination with class, multi-culturism, victimization, and sexuality is as misdirected as the efforts of the "Friends of the Indian" in the nineteenth century. Her blackly-humorous satire on political correctness deflates sanctimoniousness in "Looks Like I Have That White Fang #2 / in my neck again / another pale movie with a pretty / white boy in buckskins / communing with a wolf / & probably saving some Indian folks / from themselves / though at least / they look like they might actually / be Indians / instead of Jewish folks in max factor red #10 / & braided wigs . . . This is a sincere sweet movie / by laladisney & I'd love to sincerely / sweetly say I'm glad / some Indian actors got some supporting roles / but I'm scrubbing out a white sink / for mr. white as I watch this ad on TV. / & since I'm sick of weeping / all I feel like / is throwing up" (*Fire Power* [np]).

Chrystos demands readers to come to where she has lived—to the urban bus, the kitchen sink, the filthy crash pad, the mental hospital, the abandoned basement of nightmare where she cannot stop remembering the sexual abuse, in poem after poem, a catalog of all the places we would avoid—and insists that if she was there, as we read her verse, we are there too. It is often a terrifying, suffocating, angry world unmediated by the distance inherent in Whitman's catalogs, even though he was often writing about the same people: drug addicts, prostitutes, the dying, the dispossessed, the slave. Chrystos, however, has no pre-Civil War optimism, no belief in the American Dream, to buoy her message.

Indeed, perhaps the best way to approach the poems about race, class, and pain is as what is known as the "literature of trauma": the Holocaust, war narratives, and sexual terror. In *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma*, Kali Tal defines this literature as "hold[ing] at its center the reconstruction and recuperation of the traumatic experience" (17), and the task of the critic as "deconstruct[ing] the process by which the dominant culture codifies the traumatic experience" (18) and so makes it acceptable, reasonable, to the reading masses. But Chrystos insists that for American Indians

War is *not* a metaphor. Our fight is simply not broadcast on the 5 o'clock news because an important part of our genocide is the myth that we have all vanished into cupboards or are happy somewhere selling crafts to tourists. We are not allowed designated victim status because that would admit to the worst instance of mass murder in history. . . . We are continually exploited in the mass media for images of romance, savagery, stupidity and treachery." (*Fire Power* "Gathering Words" [np])

Indeed, Chrystos even resists mainstream codification with form; she refuses end punctuation to prevent closure, and she avoids page numbers to leave sequence open-ended and to make repeated rereadings necessary to find a particular poem.

In an era when multi-cultural studies, and particularly AI studies, have become a "sexy" subject, Chrystos confronts readers with the fallaciousness of their romanticized attempts to find in other cultures what they perceive to be lacking in their own. She suggests that most urban Indians—the largest group of Indians in the U.S. and Canada—are not only "Not Vanishing," they are also not colorful, not quaint, and probably not acceptable at most faculty dinner parties except as the hired help. That is a trenchant lesson for professors, as well as for students.

She does not play language politics because, as she notes, she never

learned to speak the language, as most American Indians do not. She confronts readers with the result of interracial marriages, the reality for most American Indians, and with the hegemony's penchant for taking up Indians when they are trendy, and discarding them as quickly when they begin to pale or become politically recalcitrant, and she insists—stridently, inappropriately, and loudly (so she cannot fail to be heard)—that readers probably cannot escape the hegemony even if they try, that self-serving liberal politics can be as demeaning and destructive as anything that has been visited on the Indians in the last four hundred years.

In her Lesbian lyrics—the largest group of poems on a single subject in her work—she unmasks what she describes as the cooption of Lesbian politics by the academy which ignores the Butch/Dyke construction of Lesbianism that existed before feminist criticism proposed "feminism as the theory and Lesbianism as the practice," and she is frank about the trouble she is getting herself into. In the afterword to *In Her I Am*, her collection of graphic Lesbian erotica, she writes: "Because homophobia is still a part of my community as a First Nations woman, it is very difficult for me to publish this book I've decided to weather all possible storms in order to make the book I needed to find . . . when I was 17" (*In Her I Am* 87). For her courage she has been, as she notes with wicked glee, excoriated on the Senate floor by no less than Jesse Helms. Her Lesbian poetry creates the body in luscious, lubricious, starry colors, although to read the criticism in supposedly feminist journals such as *Signs* readers would never know it. These poems are not Adrienne Rich's polite Lesbian sonnets; they are a graphic portrayal of, as Dorothy Allison says, "what Lesbians actually do," from a poet who confesses she cannot be monogamous. "Hot My Hair Smells of Your Cunt / sheets a hurricane at my throat your kisses / music breasts pressing into my back my ass / in the air wanting it / Your hands moonlight on water enter me . . ." (*In Her I Am* 25).

Certainly reading a number of her books at one sitting can be a troubling experience to most readers trained in the polite, restrained cadences of socially-acceptable poetry, but to know Chrystos only through the anthologized and critically acceptable work is to miss her humor, her sexuality, and much of her pain. As readers and critics, we are always uncomfortable with those voices who speak what we would avoid speaking, who would attempt to undermine our carefully constructed worlds that allow difference or despair only if held at a comfortable remove. Chrystos deliberately reveals the structures of exclusion, of Lacanian relationality, by being openly confrontational, by recreating the

historical role of the powerful berdache figures of Native cultures who have always challenged Western cultural expectations.

Chrystos pushes at the semi-transparent envelope of what the hegemony, politically correct or otherwise, will admit as culture, of being worthy of consideration as art. If she sometimes fails in her project (and some of her poems are sticky with self-pity and self-importance, others are simply pornographic), that does not diminish her achievement: to give readers a clear, precise, carefully detailed report from the urban underclass few encounter. The echoes of Whitman and Fanny Fern, of Tillie Oleson, of Sexton and Plath, of Audre Lorde reverberate in her work, but her vision and style are unique in their ability to uncouple readers from an unthinking racism. "Crazy Horse," a poem useful for de-romanticizing students' fantasies of contemporary American Indian life, is one of her best. "Crazy Horse / I'm ironing a shirt with your name / blue 100% cotton the label says made in Macau / Your face melts under spray starch your eyes close / our connection frayed with Mohawk gas stations / Winnebago trucks, Navajo moving & storage / This is not my shirt, nor my kin's / While I iron it for her, she listens / to rock 'n roll & television at the same time / More than our hoop is broken. . . . Crazy Horse don't look / Our home shrunk to land stabbed with oil rigs / coal strippers, uranium mines / I could dampen this shirt with my tears. . . . Crazy Horse I'm glad you're dead / can't see the maggots nod with approval / Yesterday as we stood watching speakers / after the Gay Day Parade / a Black man threw a bottle of beer at us / screamed *What are you mother-fuckin' Indians / doing here?! /* Through clenched teeth I wondered / What is anybody doing here / but us / We're surviving / Names are sacred / they know that / Their copyright laws hungry with it / I want to iron Abraham Lincoln boxer shorts / I want to buy gas at a Jesus Christ station / I want to write with a Sojourner Truth pencil / Here is the iron / burnt arm of defeat / Here their smooth white cover / an invisible fire in the walls / Crazy Horse I want to sit beside you / be told how to live here / now that it's savage with greed / wild with locks / brave with destruction / Crazy Horse my iron heart is a broken blue hoop / burning in your steps" (*Fire Power* [np]).

The task for critics now is to integrate all the voices Chrystos creates in her work. Readers cannot, although many have tried, separate her American Indian protest poems from her Lesbian lyrics from her detailed observations of the underclass. But should we also accept this persona, this pseudonym of a "Chrystos," at face value? If she makes it her business to be brutally honest, as indeed she does, why the need for a persona? Why a pseudonym? What sort of "gold" does she intend to mine

here besides her readers' liberal guilt? What, or who, is she protecting, or what is she creating? If she perceives herself as a "gun aimed at the canon," just who is holding the weapon?

As any student of American literature is well aware, raised as we are on Mark Twain, a persona or pseudonym is a subterfuge: it allows the writer to create a person who does not exist but to whom the writer can attribute everything that writer would prefer not to acknowledge. Persona allows an escape, a screen behind which real life, acceptable to society, can exist. Is this what Chrystos is doing? Is she, like Madonna, forcing readers to meet her on her own ground, rather than ours? If, for example, we knew Chrystos as Christine Satterlee (to use an old Menominee informant name), drug addict, convicted prostitute, committed to a particular California mental institution, a participant in a particular drug rehab program, a person who had to explain why she was not an enrolled member of any tribe, would we see her poetry differently?

I suggest that we would, and that the power and the message of her poetry would suffer as a result. Chrystos, as she comes to readers only through the medium of her poetry, is a self-created entity. She is the embodiment of the American Dream, revile it though she might, that in this country, anyone can create a persona by which he or she wishes to be perceived and, like Ben Franklin, use that persona for a political purpose. Her use of a pseudonym is a shrewd move and its implications are the same as her denial of her white ancestry. Both allow her to become a representative voice for those who refuse to assimilate, even though they are a product of the heritage they repudiate. Chrystos creates for her readers the persona of the marginalized individual few wish to acknowledge, to answer to. Whether or not that persona exists in "real life" is not the point; instead, that persona is a symbol for many hundreds, thousands, of people who do. Ben Franklin was no different, if more positive.

That is the "gold" of Chrystos's persona: that she gives readers a way to mine the mindset of those whom we, as professors, as upper-middle-class intellectuals, would prefer not to notice because it is too painful, too disturbing, and once accepted and acknowledged would demand political and personal action that would be inconvenient, at best. From the "dross" of everyday urban culture—all those nonentities on the bus—Chrystos forces readers to recognize the gold—the value—of lives lived out of the mainstream, out of the accepted norms of what is known as "culture." Chrystos is none other than our latest incarnation of Huck Finn, and like Huck Finn, particularly in language and sentiment, from her readers can learn a great deal about what Gertrude Stein once described as *inac-crochable*. Referring to Hemingway's story "Up In Michigan" about

loveless sex on a dreary lakeside dock, Miss Stein instructed the young Hemingway about socially unacceptable art. "That means it is like a picture that a painter paints and then he cannot hang it when he has a show and nobody will buy it because they cannot hang it either." Hemingway's reply to Stein could be Chrystos's to the critics as well: "But what if it is not dirty but it is only that you are trying to use words that people would actually use? That are the only words that can make the story come true and that you must use them? You have to use them." (Hemingway 15).

Readers no longer believe representations of loveless heterosexual sex are inaccessable. The word pictures Chrystos paints that modern critics refuse to hang on their walls describe the realities of class apart from class(rooms) and academic theory, the graphic celebration of all forms of sexuality, the conflicted politics of politically-correct ethnicity, and our own unacknowledged resistances to strong, recalcitrant, strident, smart women who don't care what the academy thinks, especially when they can enjoy turning its own discourses back onto itself and making money in the process. Mark Twain would have approved.

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A Note on Native American Literatures and Standardized Tests

Paul Hadella

About two years ago, tempted by the prospect of an \$800 payment, I submitted a passage on Native American literature for the Reading Comprehension section of a standardized test for postgraduates. This was my first attempt at writing for such a purpose. Because of the astonishing reply that my submission inspired, I vow that it will be my last.

Though my primary motive for composing the piece was, I admit, mercenary, I do take the issue of minority representation on standardized tests seriously. It's important that tests reflect the diversity of this country. I was happy, therefore, to be doing my part in trying to increase the multicultural character of national exams.

Below, I have reproduced the short essay that I sent to the testing office. No reader of this journal, I trust, would question the accuracy of the facts that I state in it:

Two classic novels of the so-called Native American Renaissance, N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* (1968) and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977), established the type of the troubled, mixed-blood protagonist of contemporary Native American fiction whose self-image is fractured and fragmented. His dual heritage has left him with an indefinite sense of who he is. Furthermore, in both novels, the protagonist has returned to the reservation after serving in the United States Army, a traumatic experience that will greatly complicate his search for personal wholeness. For many native men and women, the lack of economic opportunity on most reservations, combined with the racial intolerance and stereotyping to which they are often subjected when they venture from home, damages their sense of self-worth. Out of boredom and despair, they often turn to alcohol and violence. On the verge of self-destruction, the protagonists of *House Made of Dawn* and *Ceremony* are

ultimately re-integrated into the tribal community, resulting in a sense of belonging which gives them the strength to survive. Both novels stress the connection between the protagonists' precarious quest for recovery and the narratives of specific Native American myths, suggesting that these individuals are participants in a profound and timeless story. Their healing is in fact predicated upon realizing that the individual, of little significance alone, has identity only insofar as he or she is an integral part of the larger community and larger story.

In the 1990s, the native man or woman who has become successful in white society as an artist, lawyer, professor, or small-business owner has emerged as a new protagonist, which can best be viewed as a variant of the type that Momaday and Silko made famous. Individual accomplishment cannot fill the spiritual void that these characters feel as a result of living disconnected from something larger than themselves. These characters have overcome the barriers of economic injustice and racial discrimination, yet they suffer from an acute case of cultural dislocation because they have lost the sense of being a part of a people, a tribe. Over the course of these novels, these characters must negotiate an identity that fulfills their need to be both independent individuals and responsible tribal members.

Thus, whether the protagonist be destitute or prosperous, living on a reservation or in a city, questions of identity haunt him or her. Who am I? Am I my own person, or am I what mainstream society perceives a Native American to be? Have I, in essence, become white by adopting the values of that culture? If I do not feel whole, is there something to be gained by connecting with traditional, tribal beliefs, which find expression through such community activities as the powwow and the ceremonies that accompany feast days? The struggle to realize who we are, though universal, is captured with especial poignancy in contemporary Native American fiction.

The testing office promised a relatively prompt response (sixty days, I seem to recall), so, after about four months, I began to wonder what had happened. I knew, through years of experience, that the connection between response time and acceptance/rejection is an illogical one. But how could I stop myself from thinking that the delay was a sign of bad luck and that my piece was no good? As it turned out, the review process took about a year. A couple of times—usually just when I had managed to forget I had ever written the essay in the first place—I received a note from the office apologizing for the long wait and assuring me that my submission would be read carefully, eventually. With each reminder, I

would retrieve the piece from my file, reread it, and fret all over again. Its main weaknesses, as I saw them, were its rather obvious point (i.e. Native American literature has changed somewhat over the years, but it is still dealing with the same serious and complex issues) and its obvious rhetorical structure ("then and now" comparison/contrast). This was hardly that piece of challenging, sophisticated prose which the guidelines demanded, that piece that would separate the deft test takers from the mere pretenders.

Finally, the response came and the news wasn't good. Rejection. Was I relieved that I wasn't criticized for being simplistic? No, because the reason for rejection was many times worse than that. Apparently, I was being blamed for telling the truth. I quote:

Regrettably, we will not be able to use this particular material. The primary reason that this submission does not fit our needs is that this topic could be expected to produce an emotional response in some test takers that would unfairly interfere with their performance. Native American test takers would be more likely to be disturbed by this material than other test takers. The Native American characters are portrayed as turning to alcohol and violence out of boredom and despair, and even "the native man or woman who has become successful in white society" suffers "from an acute case of cultural dislocation." It is inappropriate to force a Native American test taker . . . to confront the questions: "Who am I? Am I my own person, or am I what mainstream society perceives a Native American to be?"

I would be curious to read the passages on Native American literature that make it onto this test. The person who rejected my piece invited me to try again, but if I'm not allowed to say that Native American literature is often quite disturbing, and that it poses difficult questions about personal identity, then I have no idea what to write. Do you? I once heard Sherman Alexie say, in response to the "identity question," that "being Indian in this country has a lot to do with social problems and the pain of being Indian." He elaborated: "My measure for being Indian is that you're not really an Indian unless at one point in your life you didn't want to be." Sherman Alexie has no future as a writer of standardized tests.

[NOTE: To prevent the exam from being "leaked" to test takers, the testing agency required me to sign a confidentiality statement. Since my work was rejected, I don't believe that reproducing my essay here violates that agreement. Nevertheless, I feel obliged to keep the names of the test and the testing agency anonymous.]

REVIEWS

Reuben Snake, Your Humble Serpent: Indian Visionary and Activist. Ed. with Introduction and Epilogue by Jay C. Fikes. Foreword by James Botsford. Afterword by Walter Echo-Hawk. Santa Fe: Clear Light Publishers, 1996. Notes, Bibliography, Glossary, Index. \$24.95 cloth, ISBN 0-940-66660-X. 288 pp.

When the United States Supreme Court decided, in the infamous Smith decision of 1990, that the guarantees of religious freedom contained in the First Amendment to the Constitution were not sufficient to protect the sacramental use of peyote by members of the Native American Church, the justices probably thought that church members would quietly submit to their baffling edict. They were wrong. The Court was in for a fight, which lasted several years until Congress restrained the justices' legal indiscretions by passing the Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 1993 (restoring the "compelling state interest" test for adjudicating infringements on religious freedom) and the American Indian Religious Freedom Act Amendments of 1994 (specifically exempting the sacramental use of peyote from laws aimed at recreational drug use). It was a fight led by Reuben Snake, the respected Winnebago political activist and religious elder, and it was to be the last battle in his long career.

Reuben Snake, Your Humble Serpent is the life story of one of the most influential Native American leaders during the last three decades. Although Snake died in 1993, more than a year before the United States government would finally legalize his church's primary sacrament, he did live long enough to recount his life story to anthropologist Jay Fikes, who worked with Snake on the Native American Religious Freedom Project. Fikes interviewed Snake over a two-week period shortly before he died, then edited the transcriptions and organized them into a unified autobiographical narrative. The result is an engaging, straightforward account that seems to capture Snake's contagious optimism and charisma, presented in a direct and unassuming voice that rings true. Fikes framed

the autobiography with too much front and back matter praising Snake (foreword, preface, and introduction along with epilogue and afterword) and too little in the way of substantive explanatory background, but these minor problems may actually reflect the impact Snake's untimely death had on his colleagues in the struggle, and they detract only a little from the power of Snake's vibrant storytelling.

Reuben Snake was born on January 12, 1937, at the Indian hospital in Winnebago, Nebraska, and baptized into the Native American Church on Easter Sunday several months later. He was given the Winnebago name Kikawa Unga, an old Snake Clan name that means "to rise up," intentionally linking him both to his tribal forebears and to the resurrection of Christ. Snake grew up with family on the Winnebago reservations in Nebraska and Wisconsin and in several midwestern cities, attending both public and Christian boarding schools and encountering a menagerie of aggressive Christian missionaries along the way. He enlisted in the U. S. Army at the age of seventeen and was stationed in Berlin at the height of the Cold War, and he also attended government and denominational colleges and worked in a number of menial jobs while periodically returning to his home community. One of the most striking aspects of Snake's life was his nearly constant movement, a product of economic necessity in the midst of racist discrimination; Snake could have become embittered, but instead he remembered these experiences as having given him the ability to appreciate and work with people from a wide range of backgrounds.

Snake married in 1960 and, through the influence of his wife's family, was a member of the Mormon church for several years. He began working with Indian community agencies and became a local leader in the Mormons' Lamanite Branch, but returned to the Native American Church when he encountered the hypocrisies of racist Mormon leaders. Snake became involved in the American Indian Movement and served as national chairman during the early seventies, but the real turning point in his life came in 1974, when he was ordained as a roadman in the Native American Church. This meant that he "had to make a commitment" and "had to live a certain lifestyle . . . to show compassion and respect towards everyone" (136). The resulting transformation made Snake a respected religious leader, and three years later he was elected to the Winnebago tribal council. His successes as tribal chairman led to leadership roles at the national and international levels, and in 1985 he was elected President of the National Congress of American Indians. He also maintained a very active role leading Native American Church meetings throughout Indian country during this period. His intense involvement in both spiritual and

political life grew out of a conviction that the two are connected and interdependent: "When I sit in a prayer meeting I pray for the well-being of my people and I pray that we will obtain all the things that we need. I pray for adequate housing, for decent education, for economic opportunity and other things, but I just can't pray and let it go at that. I have to go out and do something about it. That's why I got so deeply involved in all these projects, because I was trying to make my prayers effective" (168).

Reuben Snake lived through much—poverty, racism, dislocation, activism—that has typified the Native American experience over the past sixty years, and he knew how to tell a story. His engrossing autobiography is also an excellent introduction to a religious community that is poorly understood by many scholars and virtually unknown to most Christians. The history of the Native American Church is recounted more thoroughly in Omer C. Stewart's *Peyote Religion: A History* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1987); readers who are interested in learning more about the Native American Religious Freedom Project and their successful struggle for the legalization of sacramental peyote should consult *One Nation Under God: The Triumph of the Native American Church* (Santa Fe: Clear Light, 1996), edited by Huston Smith.

James Treat

Solar Storms. Linda Hogan. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995. \$12 paper, ISBN 0-684-812274. 351 pages.

In "Women: Doing and Being," Linda Hogan asserts, "The stories we hold secret are stories of our growth as women, our transformation, the waking moments of realization that change the direction of our lives" (*Stories We Hold* ix). The collection of writing that follows this essay attests to the curative, transforming power of such stories: "We are in the middle of overthrowing an internal dictatorship that has been forced on us, and in that revolution we are becoming whole" (*Stories We Hold* ix). Similarly, the female characters of *Solar Storms* hold five generations of

secret stories, and, in their joint effort toward change, they become whole, fractured, and begin the journey to wholeness again. For the characters of *Solar Storms*, beginnings "are everything" (334). Beginnings entail a pre-birth knowledge of and connection with all life: "We knew the languages of the earth, water, and trees. We knew the rich darkness of creation. For tens of thousands of years we spoke with the animals and they spoke with us" (334). This message of rebuilding alone makes *Solar Storms* a novel worth sharing.

The story of Hogan's clan of women unfolds against the background of political unrest of the early 1970s; the Vietnam war is coming to a close just as the American Indian Movement is "gaining momentum in the cities" (156). The Indians living near the border between Canada and Minnesota have "heard a little about the goings-on in Wounded Knee," but, in a conflict reminiscent of Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water*, "the dams and diversions of rivers to the north [a]re even more absent" from reports in the media (156). Hogan juxtaposes political events against those of earth and family with care, showing the dilemma the Indians face: mediation. For, as hungry as the Native protesters are for information—tribal elder Tulik's house fills each day in time for the radio broadcast of "Indian Time"—they are much more disquieted by the effects such technology brings. Angel, the story's narrator, notes what the loss of their lands "to the hydroelectric project" has done to her own people: "They were despondent. In some cases, they had to be held back from killing themselves" (225). Electricity upsets nature as well: "Even the migratory animals, who flew or swam by light, grew confused" (266). For the characters of *Solar Storms*, the point of the conflict is to survive it, so that rebuilding can occur and history can be passed on. Angel reflects on this knowledge: "From my many grandmothers, I learned how I came from a circle of courageous women and strong men who had walls pulled down straight in front of them until the circle closed, the way rabbits are hunted in a narrowing circle, but some lived, some survived this narrowing circle of life" (107). Indeed, Hogan's message is clear and poignantly written. Her narrator's contemporary perspective affords Hogan the leeway to communicate the strain of existing between two conflicting worldviews. Angel loves hot water and hamburgers as well as Ek's book of plants; learning to properly weight the importance of each comprises her mediation and entry into womanhood.

Hogan creates her first-person narrative through layering flashback within flashback, allowing all generations of the Iron/Wing clan to speak: Dora-Rouge, formerly Ena of the Beautiful People, now called Fat-Eaters; her daughter Agnes Iron, confidante to the last blue bear; Bush, a

Chickasaw from Oklahoma married to Agnes's son Harold (who has an affair with Loretta Wing who emerges "all cold and blue from the water," recalling Louise Erdrich's Fleur Pillager [37]); Harold's daughter by Loretta, Hannah Wing, the ice-hearted descendent of the massacred Elk Islanders; and Hannah's daughter Angela Jensen, called Angel, whose physical and emotional scars prompt her search for the reasons behind her childhood abuse. The ultimate result of Angel's search is a renewed bond with Dora-Rouge, Agnes, and Bush. Angel tells the story of her family with the wisdom and perspective only years can afford, starting with her arrival at Adam's Rib in 1972, at the age of seventeen. Even though Angel narrates, Hogan deftly begins with Agnes's reflections on the feast Bush holds when Angel is taken from her. Through the careful placement of Bush's invented mourning feast, the reader learns two very important premises of the novel: the lasting emptiness the Iron women feel when the government takes the infant Angel from them, and the lengths to which the people of Adam's Rib will go to protect and honor each other. Agnes describes exactly why the people came to the meal mourning Angel's loss: "There wasn't one among us who didn't suspect that [Bush had] invented this ceremony, at least in part, but mourning was our common ground and that's why they came, not just for her, but out of loyalty for the act of grief" (15). Such loyalty drives the novel. The people of the north uphold each other as their lives are sacked by the U.S. government's diversion of rivers and lakes for the sake of business and electricity. But, beyond this, they uphold the earth and its inhabitants, their protests of the dam construction being as much for the lost plant species and the ten thousand drowned caribou as for their own homes and way of life. Hogan's masterful placement of the mourning feast entrenches these loyalties in *Solar Storms* from the outset.

While Hogan's illuminating pieces of flashback and adroit storytelling engage the reader, her sense of humor is largely absent from *Solar Storms*. Unlike her previous novel, *Mean Spirit*, *Solar Storms* maintains its serious tone and urgency of purpose with virtually no exception. There is no John Stink getting into the movies for free or Michael Horse writing new chapters for the Bible. The reader forges through the journey into personal discovery and political insensitivity with Angel and her family, where Dora-Rouge's humor is a rare trait that other characters seemingly do not possess. When humor does enter *Solar Storms*, it is a welcome insight into characters the reader has already come to love. For example, as the families of Tulik and Angel share their dreams over breakfast, Dora-Rouge's dream leads to laughter rather than weighty interpretation: "Dora-Rouge dreamed she was a lounge singer" (239). Because humor

provides a relaxation of tension for the reader as well as a special depth to characters, *Solar Storms* could benefit from more of it.

Linda Hogan is in her element with *Solar Storms*. The novel offers an accessible and important story for Native and non-Native readers alike, drawing the attention of each kind of reader to a way of seeing that is important, keyed necessary, for the survival Hogan believes Native peoples can achieve. While the Indian perspective is definitely favored in Angel's account, Hogan makes sure to remind Natives and non-Natives alike that none of us are flawless: "Inside ourselves we are not yet upright walkers. We are tree. We are frog in amber. Maybe earth itself is just now starting to form" (351). Have faith.

Amy Greenwood Baria

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Red Earth: Two Novellas. Philip H. Red Eagle.
Duluth MN: Holy Cow Press, 1997. \$12.95 paper,
ISBN 0-930100-74-3. 160 pp.

Philip Red Eagle's book *Red Earth* is a novella about Native soldiers in Vietnam who travel through time and through a series of interconnected events, each character emerging, in some cases, in Vietnam, and, at other points, back home in many instances with foreknowledge of a future which they have already lived. Red Eagle's technique of moving characters in time is so complex that it is a little hard to explain outside the stories themselves. They are not Dickensian observers, mere ghosts of experiences past, nor are they clichéd time travelers sent back to fix

things. The best word I can think of in terms of their relationship to the past is “interactive.” Other authors have explored re-lived Vietnam experience, the warrior who returns physically but not spiritually, the trauma of Vietnam re-asserting itself in civilian life so that pre- and post-Vietnam do not exist. Red Eagle radicalizes this treatment, however, in a manner consistent with a Dakota worldview. The idea of extended kinship, the inter-connectedness of all things, is so pervasive in Red Eagle’s novel that linear cause and effect is completely disrupted. In the novel, this extended kinship centers around the fact that the “real world” of post-Vietnam experience profoundly overlaps other worlds, other beings.

An example of the disruption of cause and effect occurs in one early scene in the novel when Raymond Crow-Belt withholds a “Dear John” letter from a soldier by the name of Martinez, who, in “ordinary time,” has already received the letter. This kind of time interruption—time as points of light in three-dimensional space rather than marks along a time line—makes sense in light of war experience. As Tim O’Brien says in his well-known essay “How to Tell a True War Story”:

In any war story, but especially a true one, it’s difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen. What seems to happen becomes its own happening and has to be told that way. The angles of vision are skewed. When a booby trap explodes, you close your eyes and duck and look outside yourself. When a guy dies, like Lemon, you look away and then look back for a moment and then look away again. The pictures get jumbled; you tend to miss a lot. And then afterward, when you go to tell about it, there is always that surreal seemingness, which makes the story seem untrue, but which in fact represents the hard and exact truth as it seemed. War stories continue to unfold long after the war ends, revised by life after battle, oftentimes resisting easy meaning.

Red Eagle’s approach of placing the Vietnam story inside a much broader view of what constitutes time takes into account this tendency of war to be refracted through constantly changing angles of vision. Most amazingly, through visionary experience, Red Eagle’s characters physically return to Vietnam, years after they have come home, a journey, on the one hand, incomprehensible (why would anyone want to go back?), and, on the other, fascinating (the warrior with a sense of retrospection re-examining his experience in the actual environment it took place in rather than stateside reflection). A less capable author might have made these

characters return to Vietnam for the purpose of intervening in history and thwarting disaster—ambushed patrols forewarned, and so on. This book avoids the easy route and sends the characters back to South Asia on more complicated spiritual patrols, making them look at both Vietnam and life afterwards differently.

Characters who go back simply do whatever they can in the old/new environment by engaging in small acts of kindness, instruction, and understanding that may or may not be successful. For instance, in regards to a Vietnamese woman Raymond goes back and tries to help, we are told, “He would never know Phoung’s fate. She could have died of thirst on the high seas trying to get out of Vietnam. She could have died at the hands of pirates. She could have died in a re-education camp. He could never know. He had done what he could” (66). In Vietnam, the second time around, those sent back engage in small acts of responsibility, ironically, in ways that many of the characters have failed to find in their post-Vietnam lives. Yet Red Eagle’s effort is not to vindicate the battle experience nor find meaning in Vietnam nor to seek consolation in war. The search for meaning lies elsewhere, in tribal vision. Meaning has to do with the characters, and the author, taking seriously the notion of the sacred, assuming a teleological universe where certain people are chosen to go back in order to learn about the world of vision, of extended kinship, of responsibility. By implication, the book offers the hope that for those for whom the damage is not irreparable, such paths of responsibility, especially through the act of storytelling, lie open as possibilities for their lives after the war.

The genius of Red Eagle’s approach in depicting Vietnam experience is that he avoids the assumption that the more shocking the violence, the more accurate and authentic the portrayal. This simplistic thinking, this faith in the absolute power of realism has informed many of the films about Vietnam. Since the onslaught of all these movies, Vietnam has become a cliché where the things that should genuinely horrify us go uncriticized (such as the repeatability of Vietnam in America’s global vision), and body bags are viewed in conjunction with eating popcorn, the films, ultimately, ending up one more grotesque display of testosterone in a pop culture that has become obsessed with violence. In his abandonment of realism, Red Eagle takes the road of the artist, assuming that the truth lies outside a mere recitation of the facts. A more metaphorical journey makes a lot of sense in terms of conveying Vietnam experience since metaphor brings together disparate reality, seeks out surprising comparisons between things which, on the surface, might seem contradictory or unrelated. And what could be more contradictory than Vietnam, espe-

cially an Indian fighting in a place that became known in military jargon as “Indian country?” How could realism possibly serve such a discussion?

Even my analysis here is limited by overly fixed meaning: “metaphor” isn’t exactly the term for what Red Eagle is doing since he is using tribal vision to describe Vietnam and assuming that vision gets as close to the bone as any “objective” account. To quote Joy Harjo’s important phrase on the back of the book, Red Eagle’s is a “point of view based in tribal realities.” At the heart of the book is a question that Red Eagle is the first to ask, as far as I know: What does it mean to cast Vietnam in the context of sacred story, sacred vision? A question of this magnitude asks us not only to re-examine Vietnam but to reconsider the meaning of the oral tradition as well, an incredibly important endeavor in our search for the present-day meaning of the tradition—a strategy that moves Native traditional narrative beyond ethnography to contemporary relevancy.

The book makes another contribution toward furthering Native literary studies in that it casts Native American homecoming stories in a totally new light. A historical paradigm for Native novelists, which dates back to the novels of the 1930s and extends to novels of the so-called Native American literary renaissance, is the theme of the warrior who returns home psychically wounded whose reintegration into the home community is difficult due to both cultural and personal distance. Many of the characters are already estranged from their home communities before they ever leave for war, and the battle experience complicates their problems. The earlier novels were more pessimistic, but in the later works, most of these characters are brought back into the fold through ceremonial and ritual participation, as well as discovering key identity markers through the oral tradition that move them beyond a sense of alienation, beyond angst over personal identity toward the larger issue of what it means to be one of the people. Red Eagle’s novel, however, is not about coming home to the reservation; it is about coming home to battle overseas, an ironic reversal of the earlier pattern. It is about going home to a place you’d rather not return to, going home to a place that never was home and yet ends up being more home than you could have ever imagined. This other “Indian country” embodies yet another extension of colonial expansionism—a place that, like the Americas, was first overrun by Europeans, more specifically, the French, then the U.S.

In the homecoming novels, the characters deal with personal identity and with cultural issues, but the critique of the oppressive colonial relation, particularly in regards to land theft, is seldom directly discussed as one of the factors that has created the characters’ alienation in the first

place. Such critique is implicit rather than explicit. By making ritual knowledge available, even in Vietnam, by sending healthy warriors back like Raymond Crow-Belt who already have solid cultural ties rather than cultural distance, the focus of the storytelling shifts from the malaise of the tribal protagonist to the system that creates malaise. The tribal protagonist isn’t messed up; Vietnam is messed up. Even with the less well-adjusted characters in the novella like Stoney, the tribal world, that surrounds him, is still intact; the world of vision and spirit is primary. Thus, colonialism becomes a direct subject of critique, foregrounded, rather than backgrounded, as in the homecoming novels, behind more prevalent themes such as reconnection to tradition. This kind of account reminds us that American involvement in Vietnam is no accident; it occurred in an historical context that can be traced back to nineteenth-century Indian country where one culture imagines itself superior in terms of its predestined progress and sees itself impeded by another culture holding it back from achieving its goals, wherein the obstruction of the Other must be removed by whatever means necessary.

I have to show my biases as an Oklahoma Indian writer by mentioning that the title of the novella, *Red Earth*, refers not only to the similarity between Vietnam’s topography and the remembered earth of the character Raymond’s trip to Oklahoma in his youth, but it may also be a subtle link to the author’s discovery of voice in the summer of 1992 in Norman, Oklahoma, where over three hundred Native writers from throughout the Americas were in each other’s presence talking about their craft, sharing ideas, visiting, and partying into the wee hours of many mornings in a fashion that approached the level of myth. This gathering was most notable because Indians were talking with other Indians about things Indian rather than being interpreted by the usual crowd of Indian experts. About this meeting, Red Eagle’s biographical blurb says, “Inspired by everyone there he decided to start writing the stories he had been wanting to tell but could not find the voice. He found it in Oklahoma.” This notion of the inspiration of red earth informs the novel as well, the way in which a place has meaning through the spirit voices that reside there and make their way into stories.

Craig Womack

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