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Louis Owens

Chris LaLonde, Guest Editor

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Preface

Chris LaLonde

Mixedblood writer, scholar, and teacher Louis Owens' brief memoir of growing up in the Salinas Valley of California, entitled "Water Witch," reveals many of the elements and concerns that are important in his fiction. With keen eye and ear, Owens renders the parched landscape of central California and the ranches that dotted its "burnt gold hills." Within that landscape—against a backdrop of a range of children and friendly ranch dogs all keeping their distance, of squirrels chattering warning calls and red-tailed hawks wheeling in the light of a "washed-out sun"—moved Owens' father, divining so that the ranch might survive. The attention to detail and description in order that the *space* in which beings move, human and otherwise, might be seen as a *place* can be found throughout Owens' writing. More to the point, the image of Owens' father taking measured steps across withered ground with a willow fork in his hands, Louis Owens and his older brother taking their own equally measured steps at a respectful distance behind, brings together family and familial connections, memory, water, and the idea of the need to search for something vital that is hidden from view and not easily accessible. Never once, Owens writes, did his father fail to find water, though "always it was hidden and secret, for that was the way of water in our part of California." Like his father, and like other Native American writers, Owens takes careful and carefully measured steps in and with his fiction, autobiography, and literary and cultural criticism in order to find and reveal what, like the water Owens' father witches, has been and is still today largely hidden from our sight.

Of Choctaw-Cherokee-Irish descent, Owens, a professor of English

at the University of New Mexico, is the author of various critical works, including the seminal *Other Destinies: Understanding the American Indian Novel* (1992); autobiographical pieces; short fiction; and five novels whose settings range from the Pacific Northwest to the American Southwest, from California to the Yazoo River country of Mississippi: *Wolfsong* (1991), *The Sharpest Sight* (1992), *Bone Game* (1994), *Nightland* (1996), and *Dark River* (forthcoming 1999). As is the case with so many Native American writers, and here Gerald Vizenor especially comes to mind, Louis Owens homes in on issues of identity and interrogates the invention of the Indian throughout his work. In the autobiography "Motion of Fire and Form" he writes that "the mysteries of mixed identity and conflicted stories, both the stories we tell ourselves and the stories others tell about us and to us, are what haunt my fiction" (92). Those fictions ask us to think, among other things, about the identity of the characters, of the texts, and of the author. If we respond, then the texts educate us along with the characters on the invented Indian and the stories told and re-told about it. Those stories are the product of the dominant culture, created in an effort to keep Native Americans invisible and part of what Owens sees as America's attempt to bury the past. However, like the Salinas River erupting from its underground channel to confound both those who had dammed it and those who have come after, a seasonal event which Owens describes in "Water Witch" and which is central to his memory of California, over the past seven years, especially, Louis Owens has burst forth with fiction and non-fiction in order to help insure that Native Americans will not be buried or hidden from sight.

Owens closes "'The Song is Very Short': Native American Literature and Literary Theory" by reiterating the complexity and difficulty of the task before any one desiring to produce, read, teach, or write about Native American literatures. In order to do so without violation, we must labor to avoid colonizing text, writer, literatures, and Peoples with and in discourse. If Native American writers like Louis Owens are writing back to the center from the provocative and liberating liminality of the reformulated frontier, then it behooves us to pay attention to those voices, hear them, and comment on them from the ideology of the frontier, that place where cultures and communities come into contact and hybridization is frequently the result, rather than merely using the language of the center to appropriate the texts, and thus continue to silence and bury Native peoples. The essays collected here have resulted from listening carefully and well to the voices in and of Louis Owens' texts and then critiquing those texts in the spirit of mediation, not violation.

Rochelle Venuto's "*Bone Game's* Terminal Plots and Healing

Stories” emphasizes the importance of stories and storytelling to identity and healing in Owens’ work, arguing that “For Owens . . . stories structure existence.” Storytelling presupposes the existence of the community necessary if healing is to occur for the individual, the group, and the world. Moreover, by having his protagonist Cole McCurtain come to realize over the course of his journey to healing that he has a responsibility to create his own stories in order to combat the stories of evil being told and enacted around him, Owens tacitly articulates his own responsibility as a writer, and that of Native American writers in general. Venuto shows that in acknowledging that responsibility with and in *Bone Game*, Owens offers a “multivalent critique of Santa Cruz,” situates his text in a “Native American literary discourse” on the themes of identity and healing, and inscribes an “other” destiny for characters, himself, and the reader.

Informed by post-structuralist theory and Derrida’s critique of the privileged center of Western philosophy and discourse, Margaret Dwyer’s “The Syncretic Impulse: Louis Owens’ Use of Autobiography, Ethnology, and Blended Mythologies in *The Sharpest Sight*” makes a case for Owens’ second novel as a readerly text that needs to be approached in the spirit of both/and rather than that of oppositional, binary thinking if it is to be fully understood and appreciated. She argues that Owens “appropriates and subverts the colonists’ canonized literature” and the expectations of those readers coming to the text with a preconceived idea of what constitutes a Native American novel. Dwyer shows both the importance of the Diana of Nemi stories from Phrygian and Roman mythology in *The Sharpest Sight* and how Owens turns the Nemi references and the Grail Romance on their heads. Similarly, “Owens turns the tables on those expecting just Choctaw myths by picking up European myths and syncretically weaving them into his American Indian story.” For Dwyer, the result is a text without a privileged center, but one which actively engages the reader in the search for meaning and the problematic of identity.

Like Dwyer, Linda Lizut Helstern emphasizes Owens’ acts of appropriation and subversion in her essay “*Nightland* and the Mythic West.” She argues that Owens “reconfigures the mythic West . . . as post-contact Indian country inhabited by a cultural mix of Anglos, mixed-bloods, full-bloods, animals, and ghosts.” In writing from and of that New West, Owens turns to his Cherokee ancestry to help ground his illumination and interrogation of “hybrid cultural identity” for both characters and the genre Western. The stories Grampa Siquani tells of the Thunder Twins and of Kanati, for instance, help the reader to see the complex identities of Will Striker and Billy Keene, enrich and complicate our reading of the

sexual politics being played with and played out in the text, and give the novel moral depth and force. Helstern also stresses that the stories Grampa Siquani tells are about “Cherokee death and Cherokee survival”: as such, they resonate with *Nightland* as a whole.

Death and survival are also at the heart of Owens’ first novel, *Wolfsong*. In “Wilderness Conditions: Ranging for Place and Identity in Louis Owens’ *Wolfsong*,” Susan Bernardin argues that Owens confronts, interrogates, and reconfigures the tropes of wilderness and Indian, particularly as both are cast as vanishing, in order to counter a pervasive and dangerous sense of death and loss. Symbolizing the *terminus ad quem* of westward expansion across the continental United States, the community of Forks, Washington in *Wolfsong* presents us with a spectrum of Euro-American perceptions on the land. Bernardin shows how Owens’ narrative articulates those perceptions and offers the reader a way to move beyond them by having the environment serve “as protagonist itself, shaping and even directing Tom Joseph’s search for belonging and identity.” That search necessitates three errands into the wilderness that highlight the importance of water, which Bernardin rightly sees as emphasized throughout the narrative, to Tom’s quest for self and culminates with the wolfsong echoing a refrain of return that transforms the protagonist, the tropes created and perpetuated by the dominant Euro-American culture, and the reader.

Like Bernardin, Lee Schweninger recognizes the importance of landscape to Tom Joseph and his search for identity. “Landscape and Cultural Identity in Louis Owens’ *Wolfsong*” situates the Native land ethic that emerges in the novel within the context of Salish cultures. He points out that the conflation early in the narrative of old-growth sacred cedar being logged, the death of Jim Joseph, and Tom Joseph’s return to the valley for his uncle’s funeral directs us to the intimate connection between place and spirit which must be recognized and maintained if survival is to be possible for individuals, cultures, and the environment. Synthesizing Native and non-Native perspectives on the environment and a land ethic, including Owens’ own published thoughts on these subjects, Schweninger offers a rich reading of the novel that positions Tom Joseph as a “mediator between the spiritual and physical worlds” who must appreciate, understand, and internalize the coast Salish perspective on the environment and acknowledge and learn from the lessons in change he is offered throughout the text. Ultimately, Schweninger argues, Tom Joseph succeeds in his quest for identity because he integrates the spiritual and the physical; furthermore, by “embrac[ing] the literal landscape and the vast promise of the northern woods,” he “embodies the hope of a forceful

return.”

Each of the authors included in this special issue emphasizes the importance of stories for Owens, his characters, and his texts. And Owens’ stories, his novels, are important for us all. Just as the bridge in *The Sharpest Sight* serves as the point of contact between cultures and a betwixt and between space offering Mundo Morales a vantage point and perspective from which to scan the Salinas River for Attis McCurtain’s body, so too do Owens’ novels exist and serve as liminal spaces within which a different vantage point and perspective are offered and other plots, other stories, and other destinies are articulated. If Louis Owens is obsessed with water, with rivers and streams, and if, as Susan Bernardin points out, water can be read as a “force of growth, regeneration, and cyclical return,” then the bridge that is his fiction is what enables Louis Owens to offer a counter-narrative to that presented by the dominant culture. Moreover, it is a bridge that carries readers from ignorance to awareness, carries us, that is, across to a point where we can finally begin to see Native Americans.

I wish to thank Janne Skaffari, Brita Wårvik, and, especially, Pekka Lintunen for their help in retrieving materials for this issue sent to me via electronic means. I also want to thank John Purdy and his staff for allowing me to guest edit the issue from afar, and for tolerating the inevitable time lags and problems that resulted.

Clear Waters: A Conversation with Louis Owens

John Purdy

Educator, scholar, novelist, Louis Owens has numerous volumes to his credit, including the highly acclaimed *Other Destines: Understanding the American Indian Novel* and two critical studies of John Steinbeck. He also has a collection of essays—*Mixedblood Messages: Literature, Film, Family, Place*—in production, due for a Fall release from the University of Oklahoma Press. I will leave the listing of his novels to the scholars who follow in this special issue of *SAIL*. However, I will mention that he has yet another, *Dark River*, due for release next Winter, also from Oklahoma.

The following conversation took place at Owens' home in the mountains near Albuquerque. Louis and his family—Polly, his wife of twenty-three years, and his two daughters, Elizabeth and Alexandra—are gracious hosts, and their home—surrounded by juniper and wildlife, its horse corral below, and its clear view of the Sandia Mountains—the comfortable setting for this, the last installment of four days of wide-ranging discussions of fly-fishing and politics, espionage and University of New Mexico basketball, contemporary higher education and the environment.

John Purdy: So, where to begin? Let's start by talking about your novels. How did you start writing fiction?

Louis Owens: The first novel I wrote was *Wolfsong*. I began it in my attic room in the Forest Service bunkhouse in Darrington, Washington one fall after the snows came and almost everyone else had left for the year. I wanted, really, to write a novel about the wilderness area itself, the

Glacier Peak Wilderness, making the place the real protagonist of the novel and the characters ways of giving the trees and mountains and streams and glaciers a voice.

JP: Did I tell you the story about the first time I used that novel, at Western [near the locale it describes]? I had a student in the back who, when we first began discussing it, furrowed her brow and said: “Where is this town, Forks? These characters seem familiar.” I asked her where she was from, and she replied “Darrington” [the community that is the model for that in the novel].

LO: Well, actually, I named it Forks because I wanted to disguise the town. Also, because the rivers [the Skagit, Sauk, and Stillaguamish near Darrington] come together [ultimately], and that is symbolic. But I had somebody who actually made a pilgrimage to Forks and came back to tell me how great it was to find the town where the novel is set. [Forks is on the Olympic Peninsula in Washington state.] I didn’t have the heart to tell her that it wasn’t Forks.

JP: Well, Forks is a lot like Darrington. They’re both small, logging communities.

LO: Darrington may be meaner, at least way back when I lived there in the 1970s. The first words spoken to me there were by these three loggers who wanted to know if I preferred to have my hair cut off with a chainsaw or burned off with kerosene.

Anyway, that’s how I started writing the book, and then I put it down and went back to school, where I picked it up again to work on while I was writing my dissertation. Bill Kittredge was a writer in residence at U.C. Davis at the time, and Bill read a draft of it, liked it, and did me the great favor of sending it off to his agent. It was read by Gary Fisketjohn, who I think was at either Random House or Knopf at the time, and he said he liked it and that he was sure they’d publish it. I thought, “Who says being a writer is so hard?” But the novel was turned down, nominated by Fisketjohn for the Pushcart Press Book Editor’s Award—which it didn’t receive—and then reconsidered and rejected a second time. That’s when I put it on the shelf for about a decade. Basically, I was young and had my heart broken as a writer. I was pretty naive.

Wolfsong was finally published because I happened to be talking with John Crawford of West End Press one day, and he asked if I had any work he might consider. I said that, well, I did happen to have a novel somewhere, and that was that.

JP: And *The Sharpest Sight*?

LO: I started *The Sharpest Sight* in 1982. Actually, I’d started it years before with a short story about a friend in high school who committed

suicide. I tried to write about him in a hundred different ways and just couldn't do it. Finally, his story became embedded in an invisible way in *The Sharpest Sight*, a novel that is primarily about my brother who vanished in the U.S. after three tours in Vietnam. I worked on that novel off and on over the years as I also did other more academic things—the things you do to get a job, get tenure, and so on. During that time I also wrote *Other Destinies*, a critical book, plus a couple of books on John Steinbeck.

JP: Scholarship and fiction? Different voices . . .

LO: In a way. Anyway, it got published rather strangely, too. Oxford [University Press] was interested in it. They said they wanted to publish it, but they kept stringing it along without a contract for six months or a year. I can't really remember. By then Oklahoma was starting its new series, with Gerald Vizenor as editor, and I ran into Kimberly Wiar at a conference. She asked me if I had any work they could consider. I sent her the manuscript of *Other Destinies* and she got back to me within a couple of weeks saying they wanted the book. So I withdrew it from Oxford, probably ruffling some feathers in the process, and officially submitted it to the University of Oklahoma Press.

While talking about *Other Destinies*, Kim—who is a senior editor at O.U. Press—asked what else I was working on. I said a novel, and she surprised me by asking if they could consider it. That's how both *Other Destinies* and *The Sharpest Sight* came to be published by Oklahoma, in the American Indian series.

JP: That was announced at the M.L.A. [Modern Language Association's annual convention] in San Francisco that year. I remember the reception, and Vizenor's speech.

LO: That was a good reception. It's a good series. These books [the two novels] were really written for myself, but they were published with these presses because I happened to bump into the editors; things happened to come together at the right times.

JP: I've wondered about that—the time frame itself—but also the publication, the writing of *Other Destinies*. I remember it came out so closely to *Sharpest Sight*. And that would be a question: do you see the work on fiction and criticism as a balance to one another or do they interact in some way?

LO: I think . . . inevitably they will interact. They have to. The mind works as a whole, so, to say while writing a piece of fiction that the ideas from reading and writing criticism don't work in somehow would be dishonest. It may not be conscious, but it has to have some effect. Gerald Vizenor is perhaps the best at making it obvious, at blurring the line

between the two in the minds of his readers.

JP: One of the things he does is to take that whole universe—academics, scholarship—and put it into his fiction: Arnold Krupat’s there, you’re there, the whole lot of us.

LO: For Jerry, the line between fiction and non-fiction does not seem to exist. For him, his fiction is certainly meta-fiction, that generates its own theory.

JP: Well, that takes us through *Sharpest Sight*.

LO: Let’s see. *Bone Game*. I remember the first time I went to Santa Cruz in the ’70s. The place had a feel to it, a—I don’t know—a dark presence. I had forgotten about that, but when I moved back there [to teach] in 1990, I felt it. I could feel it in those mountains and canyons.

JP: You could feel it in the place you lived?

LO: No, we lived about seventeen miles north, in Boulder Creek, deep in the redwoods. I felt okay there, but Santa Cruz had a definite, haunted feeling for me, and I began researching the history of the place. What really stood out for me was what seemed like a pattern of almost ritualistic violence spanning almost two centuries. I came across a reference to the killing of a Spanish priest at the Santa Cruz mission in 1812, and I found an interview conducted with the son of one of the Ohlone Indian men who killed the priest. That became the genesis of *Bone Game*.

That book was very different from anything I’d written before. I wrote it in a small room I’d built into my garage, about a hundred feet away from our house, off in the trees. Instead of working in the mornings, which I prefer, I found that I had to write that at night because if I got up at four a.m. to write, my young daughters would inevitably get up with me. So I had to work after they went to sleep, usually between 10:00 p.m. and 2:00 or 3:00 a.m.

JP: The witching hours.

LO: Yeah. It was scary, actually. There was an owl that took up residence right outside the office, that would hoot all night.

JP: That’s a haunting book. I remember when you came to my N.E.H. seminar [summer, 1993] and read from the manuscript; it was eerie.

LO: In some ways it’s my favorite of my novels, the one in which I took the most risks and experimented most radically. I wanted to write a non-linear novel, one that worked rather like a mosaic. I imagined it completely before writing it—though of course many surprises happen when you write, and that is maybe the greatest pleasure in writing. But I wanted it to be a story in which all times and all actions coexisted simultaneously. I felt that I couldn’t convey the fabric of violence in that place any other way. It can be confusing for a reader who may have trouble figuring out

when or where or within what consciousness he or she is at any given moment.

JP: So, it's a geospecific place that is deep with the history of violence.

LO: And to convey that . . . I wanted to explore that sense, the enormous sense of loss that the indigenous people of the Santa Cruz area, the Ohlone, experienced. Within a single generation—the matter of a few years, even months—so much was lost, changed forever, as the result of the coming of Europeans. That's why the novel begins with the lines, "Children. Neófitos. Bestes. And still it is the same sky, the same night arched like a reed house, the stars of their birth." I wanted to convey in those lines the extraordinary shock of recognizing that the world has not changed at the deepest, most important levels, though one's people or culture may have vanished. It's a haunting sense to me.

JP: Then the killing of the priest is the apt, the perfect act to precipitate the events in the novel, the evil that came with the change.

LO: Yeah. That's how I felt. And in a way, Santa Cruz is a microcosm for the U.S. There's been so much violence perpetrated in its history.

JP: Yesterday, we were talking about the possibility of making films from your novels. You said you thought *Wolfsong* would be the easiest to film; do you see *Bone Game*, then, as the most, or one of the most, difficult?

LO: I think it would be the most difficult, given the time shifts, but *Wolfsong* and perhaps *Nightland* might be easily filmed. In fact, *Nightland* has already been optioned for a movie. *Bone Game* would probably be very scenic, or filmic, but structurally it's complicated by the non-linear plot. *Nightland*, on the other hand, was an experiment for me in writing as purely a linear plot as I could. In that novel I wanted everything to follow rapidly from the single event in the opening scene—a body falling out of the sky. I tried to create a feeling of an inevitable rush of plot beginning with the first line.

JP: Well, it's certainly dramatic enough. A body falling from the sky, it gets the reader right away.

LO: It should hook the reader. It hooked me as a writer, actually. The whole novel began with a vision that came to me one day of a body falling from the sky. I'd also been reading a newspaper account of buzzards attacking barnyard fowl in west Texas, a true and strange account, and that merged with the image of a falling body to create the opening scene. Of course, for Cherokee readers a body that looks like a buzzard and comes from the west will have some disturbing resonance.

JP: Well, producers or directors seem to be looking for that kind of hook, but one that has another level of meaning is even more interesting.

LO: I guess I didn't impress them. (Laughter.) Seriously, though, I don't

know what they really want. Does anybody? Filmmakers or publishers? Trying to figure them out would probably drive you crazy, or make you write what they want instead of what you want. That's probably one of the few benefits of having a job, to have the luxury of writing what I want to write.

Nightland was written in large part for my Aunt Betty, to whom it is dedicated. I'd written about my father's people, who are Choctaw, and drawn on our family's experiences living in Mississippi and California, but I hadn't written anything about my mother's Cherokee roots. My aunt, who is the last surviving member of my mother's family, called one day to ask if I'd do some research for her on her Cherokee family. That made me realize that I should write a story about Cherokee mixedbloods like my aunt. Perhaps my mother's death about ten years ago had made that kind of writing too difficult until now.

At any rate, the mythology that structures the foundation for *Nightland* is Cherokee, not pan-Indian or anything like that, but Cherokee. And I knew my aunt would recognize a lot that most readers of the novel will miss. I never believe in explaining my own writing, though I happily explain other people's, but I will say that the Thunder Twins, or Sons of Thunder, are very important mythic figures in *Nightland*.

JP: Those are the things that weave their ways through the narrative.

LO: Sort of. Anyway, I did some research, for her, so she told me what her grandfather's name was and her grandmother's, which she thought since she had no written record. Actually, only half the family's on the Dawes rolls, and they're all on the 1910 Oklahoma Indian census. It occurred to me that I really should have written a book about my mother's family, too. The Cherokee side. And that's how a body came to be falling from the sky.

JP: So your aunt helped put the context to your falling body.

LO: I figured that, maybe, one percent of the people who read the book will get that, if anyone does at all. [The tie of the present with the older stories.] But she read it, and wrote back, in one of her few letters, saying "You're a real writer!"

JP: Did she ask where she was in it?

LO: No, but she did mention that "There's some bad words in it."

JP: Well, it has some of the same qualities of your earlier novels, that sense of layered time and events. What happened in the past is being felt in the present.

LO: Yeah, that's true. I guess one thing I'm working on in most of my writing is the way America has tried, and continues to try, to bury the past, pretending that once it's over we no longer need to think about it.

We live in a world full of buried things, many of them very painful and often horrific, like passing out smallpox-infested blankets to Indians or worse, and until we acknowledge and come to terms with the past we'll keep believing in a dangerous and deadly kind of innocence, and we'll keep thinking we can just move on and leave it all behind. That's a reason that one of *Nightland's* protagonists, Will, ends up living on a ranch containing a world of buried things, including even a smashed Range Rover.

JP: Out of sight but still a part of the story . . .

LO: Right. But he's going to stay there. You can't run from that buried history.

JP: In a way, that rings of Santayana—those who don't know history are doomed to repeat it—and Faulkner's "dead hand of the past," and Silko's "if you don't know the stories, you don't know what's happening now."

LO: It's about processing the past, consciously and unconsciously. James Welch's work deals with it, too. *Fools Crow*, and one of his best, *Winter in the Blood*.

JP: It has one of the great lines, the revelation that comes when Old Bird farts.

LO: An epiphany carried on the wind. We just talked about that in class. That's a great novel.

JP: So, now you have the new novel in production, *Dark River*.

LO: *Dark River* will be published by Oklahoma next Winter, and incidentally I'm very pleased to be back with Oklahoma after an unpleasant foray with Dutton Signet who published *Nightland*. *Dark River* is very different, again, from what I've written before, and I'm sure it also is very similar. I wanted to overturn a lot of conventions in this novel, disrupt stereotypes in comic and violent ways, with the emphasis upon the comic.

JP: I see what you mean. I like how you play with them. The "week-end warrior" who is out there trying to experience the "thrill" of war . . .

LO: The militia . . .

JP: Yeah, but even more insidious than that in some ways, less blatant. The professional person who comes from the urban center to learn the ways of the "wilds" and to hunt humans. Then the convention of the Vietnam veteran, the Black OPS type of characters, and you take them all apart.

LO: Well, good. I'm glad you think that. And actually, the militia were inspired by a group of guys I ran into when I was backpacking on a reservation. They were wearing camouflage uniforms, out practicing war. Disneyland with weapons. I know there are people like that, practicing

violence against others. By the way, those weekend militia guys were white and they were on the reservation illegally, but in such a remote spot that nobody else probably would have come across them. There is quite a bit of violence in the novel, but I like to think it has an almost slapstick quality to it, disturbing and comic at the same time.

JP: That group is interesting because it has such a wide array of characters; they're all participating in the same type of activity, but operating from different backgrounds and values, so there are these moments of crisis for some of them: "Are we going to kill these women, or what?" It is no longer a game, and they have to decide.

LO: Ironically, in a group like that the most violent are often the individuals who never experienced war.

JP: They haven't had to live the aftereffects.

LO: Well, yeah. You were in Vietnam. You know what I'm talking about. I wasn't but my brother was there for three years and a lot of my friends were there and a number of them died there. It seems to me that it is almost always the people who haven't experienced the immediacy of violence who are capable of getting involved in it as a game.

But that's just a part of the novel. I wanted to bring together a whole convergence of different characters. Stick them all in one place and see what happens.

JP: And it has such a wide array; I mean, not just the characters in the canyon, but on the reservation, too. In fact, a little while ago you were talking about the genesis of that reception in the casino; it came from one you attended on a reservation once. That's marvelously funny: "stranger than fiction."

LO: Well, I hope there's a lot of humor in it.

JP: There is, all the way through. And I won't ask about the conclusion since the book has yet to be released, but I like how you bring those various conventions from several genres together.

LO: You know, it's a strange conclusion and some people will probably be unhappy with it and some people may not. I like it myself. At the end of the novel, I sort of wanted to deconstruct the novel, I suppose, and the whole process of storytelling. Explore what it means to say stories have no ends. And I wanted to take apart all the clichés, and that's why I have this major character in the novel, one I really like, who's running around shouting Italian phrases at women. This was a character actor in Hollywood who learned his Italian from Sal Mineo and other actors, and says Sal didn't speak Italian very well. He's a very good friend of Iron Eyes Cody, and has Cody's cat. And wig. (Laughter.)

JP: And that poor cat. (More laughter.)

LO: A grim fate.

JP: Before I ask you about that collection of essays you have coming out, and I do want to talk a bit about it, I have to ask you: you have a lot of fly fishing in your novels . . .

LO: I like to fish. . . . Well, you know water has always been an obsession. I guess I'm really obsessed with it. Jerry Vizenor pointed this out to me recently. You see, he's obsessed with tree lines, for some reason, and for me it's water. I've always lived near water: by the Yazoo River in Mississippi, the Salinas River and Coast Range creeks in California; I've always fished. My earliest memories, really, are of fishing. I could barely walk. And my teen-age years, adolescent years, I was *obsessed* with it. I spent all my time on that water. And Cherokees have a medicine, called "Going to Water," which is one of the most powerful of all medicines. I think maybe that's why we've survived this long. Water's really important.

Of course, I lived in the North Cascades, where you're wet all the time, and that's another aspect to it. But I love to fish. I love to try to imagine what the fish are thinking.

JP: When you use it, it seems to be a very positive characteristic or quality for people who have other problems.

LO: I guess it is. It's clearly an escape, in a way. I like to go fly-fish a river by myself, backpack in, and I'll start fishing in the morning, and the next thing I realize, it's dark. I've lost a whole day, fishing and reading the river all day, and that's as close to any kind of a Zen experience I've ever had. I try to give that to my characters. And it's a connection, clearly, trying to connect to something.

The nicest moment in Thoreau's *Walden* is the description of fishing at night. That connection.

JP: He does it in *The Maine Woods*, too. His journals of his trips up there.

Then, of course, some of us connect and others don't, or more often. (Laughter.)

LO: You're more obsessed than I am!

JP: Well, what about the collection of essays. You told me about it while you were working on it, but we haven't talked about it since.

LO: It's a collection of essays I've written over the past several years and new essays put together. A really eclectic bunch of pieces that deal with mixedblood identity, representations of Indians in films like *Dances with Wolves*, there's an essay in there on the invention of John Wayne, which actually came out of a request from a magazine to write about Wayne from a Native American perspective, as a hero. I went back and watched a lot of his films, so I became a minor expert on John Wayne; it's

fascinating, that evolution. So, I have Wayne and Kevin Costner, and a fairly severe critique of *Dances with Wolves*, I guess. Invariably funny, because you can't help but be funny when you talk about that movie.

And about three environmental essays, one called "How Native Americans Can Save the World." I'm looking at indigenous attitudes toward the environment and Native epistemologies. There is a sense of responsibility that I think is a tradition to many Native Americans—traditional Native American beliefs that stress responsibility to the world we live in, which is the only way we're going to survive as a species. Somehow, we have to learn this, and unfortunately most of us have not learned it. Still bulldozing and cutting, no real sense that if you clear cut a rain forest in Brazil, you affect the climate of Scandinavia.

And I have several autobiographical essays in there as well, along with about fifteen or so photographs of my family that go back to about the turn of the century. Pictures of my mother's family in Indian Territory, log cabin. Mixedblood Cherokees hanging out in the Territory. Just surviving.

What fascinates me about that, looking at these old pictures, is that you end up with this rainbow coalition. One photo is of a family, a neighboring family of my mother's great-grandmother, her neighbors, a mixedblood Indian family, with about six or seven kids, and they form an arc, like a rainbow, parents in the middle. There's one little boy who's brown as a coffee bean and beside him is his blonde brother, and they look *just* alike, but they're different colors, and the rest of the family is a range of complexions and hues. A wonderful, beautiful picture to me. It seems to me that what these people were doing down there in Indian Territory was creating their own borderland. They were living everything we like to write about and theorize about today, as in Gloria Anzaldúa's book, and they were doing it just out of necessity for survival. No one making a big production out of it. Just living as human beings, and I really admire that.

JP: When you were talking about *Bone Game* a few moments ago, and the California experience, that dramatic, world-shifting, world-changing interaction in one generation, you wonder how humans can respond to that, react and accommodate that type of an experience. But here, you're suggesting that in other places, then, that can be handled generationally, that it is done through generations as an act of survival.

LO: It's a totally human act, you know. In the Southeast . . . well, a lot of people don't really understand; the Cherokees, for example, are the butts of many jokes: "I had a Cherokee grandmother who was a princess" right? And a lot of blonde Cherokees running around. The fact is that the

Southeast tribes met, married and intermingled with European traders very early, Irish, English, down in Mississippi and Louisiana there were the French. The Welsh came in, Scots. And that's why you find the repetition of those European surnames among the tribes, and that was a process that took place over many generations. That's why you find a Cherokee principal chief named John Ross. Ross becomes a big name among the people, or McCurtain, or Garland. That's fascinating, such a different history from those of the plains tribes or Northwest, or inland nations.

That's what fascinates me about this whole area of study and why I keep doing it in spite of a lot of misgivings—that is the diversity, the complexity, in the contemporary Indian world is so profound. I'm trying, really, in my writing to get at that. I'm trying to point out that not every Indian in America is riding a spotted pony across the plains chasing buffalo. That there were people who didn't arrange their teepees in circles, but instead lived in towns with roads and cabins—the Cherokee or Creek, for example—or they lived in long houses or reed houses like the Ohlone in California. There's a tremendous diversity; today I think more than half of Indian people live in cities. They don't live on reservations, and most are mixedbloods, so there's this extraordinary range of experience that needs to be represented in art in all ways.

I don't have any patience at all with the essentialist attitudes that say non-Indians shouldn't read things [written] by Indians or talk about Indian literature or whatever. Certainly, you have to have respect and be careful, but it's absurd to say things like that because writing is about communication, and art is about dialog, and that's what we are trying to do. It's almost criminal when someone who doesn't know a culture will come in and exploit it, whether it's in writing or art, visual art, or anything else, just to make money. It's using Native Americans as an extractable natural resource. And you don't have to go very far to find examples, but at the same time, we write books, that have to be for everybody, and I think every artist should have the right to work with whatever medium he or she wants to work with, but some of the results will be bad, and some of them good, some of them will be honest and some of them dishonest. You can't tell somebody that if you're a woman you can't write about men or if you're a male you can't write about women; if you're Black you can't write about white people or if you're white you can't write about Indians or vice versa. That would make it impossible to have a Ralph Ellison, Alice Walker, Maxine Hong Kingston, Scott Momaday, anybody.

JP: That's interesting in the context of *Dark River*, with the New York anthropologist who knows all the old ways and the language.

LO: Yeah. The anthropologist is more “Indian” than the “Indians.” He’s done his research and he’s hell-bent on living traditionally according to a static idea two hundred years old. The Indians, of course, just want to get by. They want to have a four-wheel drive pick up and a microwave oven, if it’s handy, and want to live like real human beings today, but he wants . . . he comes up with the idea of a theme park . . .

JP: Right. That’s a marvelous exchange . . .

LO: He wants the Indians to turn their reservation into a theme park to live like they did two hundred years before, and they’d get all sorts of grants, of course, to do that. But the first idea the tribal council comes up with is to hire hippies to imitate them. The Indians decide to live in Scottsdale [Arizona].

JP: I just about fell out of my chair when I read that; that was a hilarious council meeting.

LO: Well, you know, it’s satire, so that stuff is always a little extreme; it’s beyond reality, but it’s to make a point.

JP: When we laugh, we laugh at some of the odd ideas we have, so it’s all worth it.

LO: Well, I read recently, came across a statement that Sherman Alexie made; he was talking about Adrian Louis and he said that whenever he sees something Adrian Louis writes he knows it’s true because Adrian lives on a reservation. Adrian happens to be PIAUTE, I believe, but he’s living on the Lakota reservation, and if you follow that logic out, that would make anthropologists the best novelists, the most honest, “truest” writers because they live on reservations, too, and they study the cultures intensely, so maybe anthropologists should write all the novels. Make our movies. (Laughter.) Some are, actually. There are “Indian” novels by anthropologists.

JP: Or anthropologist’s partners, like Theodore Kroeber. Well, there goes the syllabus; we’ll have to redesign the whole neighborhood.

Anyway, what’s in the future. Want to talk about anything you’re working on or want to work on?

LO: I don’t know what’s in the future, although I’m interested in perhaps writing another book about John Steinbeck, believe it or not, as a very early ecologist. I think that’s an aspect of Steinbeck that has never been appreciated enough.

JP: You worked on him for your dissertation.

LO: I did a couple of books on him, actually. He’s one of my favorite writers, and the funny thing is that if there’s one writer I can count on Indian people in Indian country having read, it’s Steinbeck. He’s very popular.

JP: I wonder why.

LO: I think it's because his worldview is very close to what you might find in those communities, and what Steinbeck is arguing in his writing is that we have to be responsible for what he terms the whole thing, known and unknowable, in a very deep way: that if you step into a tide pool, you have to realize that that step has changed the entire universe, and that will fit neatly into what Silko's arguing in *Ceremony*, the whole sense of having to be careful, to walk in balance, to be responsible for knowing that every single act of humanity changes the world. Steinbeck was arguing that sixty years ago, before anybody in white America really was, so I'm thinking about going back and doing some more work on Steinbeck, as in critical, and then as far as fiction is concerned, I may not write any more. Or, I may write about international espionage.

I don't know. It is a very frustrating thing, I think, trying to be a writer is extremely frustrating. I always tell my students that they should do it only if they can't help it . . . because I think writing is rewarded for all the wrong reasons. In order to be a successful Indian writer, and I talk about this in the essay collection that's coming out, you have to give the New York editors, agents, public what they expect to see. It's like Ellison's *Invisible Man*: Black people, as Ellison says, are visible *only* if they are what the white world wants to see. And if they don't fit that cliché, they are invisible. That's why his narrator is invisible, has no name, and I think that's true for Indians. To be Native American in the United States you've got to conform to the stereotype which, as Gerald Vizenor has been pointing out for years and years, was invented by the white world . . .

JP: The Invented Indian.

LO: And that's why people like Jamake Highwater are so successful, because he looked the part and wore fringe and leather, buckskin suits, did all the things and fit the images that the world expected the Indian to fit, and I think that is really central to Indian arts today, especially writing. You've got to, basically, write stereotypes. Basically have to construct clichés in order to be *seen* by a publisher, and that's very disheartening. That means you can't really do anything original.

JP: But that's one of the things I like about your fiction. We could go right back down the list chronologically, but say *Dark River*; you recognize that but then you take a cliché and tweak it.

LO: One of the many things that drives me crazy today is the fact that you really have to manufacture what Charles Newman has in a book called *The Post-modern Aura* defined as "pre-sold fiction," with the huge publishing conglomerates now, and the fact that the whole industry is run

by money managers, people who don't know anything about literature to start with, looking for commodities that have obvious, pre-sold value, and as far as indigenous writing is concerned, the value is determined by what has sold before, and the stereotypes arise from that. The people in New York don't know a damned thing about indigenous people, or much of anything beyond Manhattan, so they look for what they already know, and what they know is created by *Dances with Wolves*, *Last of the Mohicans*, Disney's *Pocahontas*, Fenimore Cooper, and Larry Mc Murtry's *Blue Duck*, all the later psychopathic breeds like in *Lonesome Dove*. And if you don't give them what they have manufactured themselves, quite frankly, they don't understand it. And if you create an anthropologist who is more Indian than the Indians, that's not what they want to see. If you have somebody who is a hair-spray addict, they think he sprays his hair all day because they don't know what's going on on reservations.

JP: Falls beyond their realm of comprehension.

LO: Exactly. And it's very frustrating. I see a number of novel manuscripts by young Indian writers that just are not going to be published in New York, and they are among the best novels I see, the most honest; they are dealing with tribal people today who are in reservation communities, or in cities, mixedbloods, or full bloods, or whatever, but they are writing about real experience, what's happening today, which includes working on your car, or having a microwave oven, the realities of life today and not being a mystical shaman. Not to say that ceremony, and traditions and spirituality are not terribly important, because they are in the communities, but what New York and Hollywood want to see are warriors, shamans, mystical medicine women, and anger, and above all, self-destruction. Dysfunction and self-destruction are marketable commodities.

JP: A long-standing convention, right?

LO: Yeah, the new version of *The Vanishing Indian*; whether it's written by Indians or non-Indians, it's a way of neutralizing Native Americans because the Euroamerican world looks at these books and sees Indians destroying one another and sees them as no threat. The anger is turned inward, with a lot of internal colonization going on, a lot of self-loathing, and a lot of the art depicts that and it doesn't go beyond that, and that's the problem. Of course, these things exist, and you've got to deal with them. There is dysfunction, it exists in all communities, and certainly alcoholism, and drugs, and abuse are big problems, but there's a *whole* lot more that needs to be written about, and that's survival.

JP: The center of Vizenor's canon.

LO: Yeah. I think Gerald Vizenor is a genius. I think he's the most brilliant American writer, period. And that's not to say that he's easy to understand, or process as a reader, but he's way ahead of almost everybody. And his writing, I think, paradoxically, is more "traditional" than anyone else's, and I've said that in print. He's certainly writing out of a tradition of trickster stories, and what trickster is designed to do: to heal us, challenge us, and attack all our false values and stereotypes and everything that's static, and so the clichéd Indian doesn't stand a chance in Vizenor's writing and that upsets a lot of people, both Indians and non-Indians alike. Because he doesn't leave well enough alone.

JP: Or *bad* enough alone? We were talking about Victor Masayesva's film, *Imagining Indians*, yesterday, and that's one of the things I like so much about it. There's that sense of clowning in it: to cure. The main character, an Indian woman in an Indian Health Service dentist's office, takes away his drill and reinscribes the lens, then tips over the camera at the end. Playful in a very profound way. That sense of attacking and taking over the mechanism, the instrument, and rewriting the image.

LO: That's wonderful, and of course it's what Victor, the director, who's in control of the camera, is doing.

JP: Exactly.

LO: And there's a lot of promise in the future with him, and people like Aaron Carr, who's a great filmmaker and writer, and absolutely well beyond all the clichés and stereotypes, and writing brilliant stuff. And Thomas King. Tom is writing about serious issues with such wonderful humor. And he's writing about tribal people in a community, who have real lives, who may be photo-journalists, whatever.

JP: Well, he caught me with Harlen Bigbear; I've been a fan ever since.

LO: Harlen's a great character. I love *Medicine River*. I teach it whenever I can.

JP: That's a good direction to take this conversation. Do you know of any new writers, any young writers who may not have been published, but who you see as promising?

LO: There are quite a few, a lot of promising writers who have been, or are being published, like Gordon Henry . . .

JP: Oh yeah . . .

LO: *Incredible* talent that hasn't been recognized enough yet, such as Betty Bell, and here in New Mexico, Aaron Carr is going to be an artist to be reckoned with for a long time, Evilina Lucero, from Isleta Pueblo, and there's a Creek, a Muskogee writer in Oklahoma named Vince Mendoza who has a lot of talent that hasn't quite been realized yet. LeAnne Howe is a wonderful, extraordinary writer. Don Birchfield. So

many people who seem to be on the cusp of doing something really great. The problem is, they have to make a living, and that surely gets in the way of being an artist. So, who knows if those people will finally be able to achieve the greatness they are capable of . . . but maybe.

JP: Well, I hope so.

LO: Me, too. And I see young writers all the time, who are writing really wonderful works.

JP: You mentioned at the beginning that *Wolfsong* and, well, *Sharpest Sight* and *Other Destines* are all in the Oklahoma series; that's been an influential series and one that can publish things that New York doesn't understand, and it's made money, a benefit for the Press but also for this body of literature.

LO: You know, Gerald Vizenor gets the credit for creating that series. I joined him as a co-editor pretty late in the series, it's Jerry's series, and he created it *exactly* because he felt there was a whole body of very valuable writing that would never be published in Manhattan, and of course he was right. They have nearly thirty volumes in their list now, and it's a place where writers can publish without worrying about whether they'll pay off their quarter of a million dollar advance, whatever, because unfortunately they don't get that kind of advance. It'd be nice if we all did. I think O.U. Press has been absolutely fantastic. They have great people. They have integrity. I don't think all the works in the series are at the same level, aesthetically, but that's always going to be the case.

I really like publishing in that series. In fact, with *Dark River* I wanted to publish it at Oklahoma from the beginning, and had no plans to do otherwise, and if I write another novel it's going to come out with O.U. because I can write *exactly* as I want to write; I don't have to worry about what an editor in Manhattan who has never been West of the Mississippi is going to think about what I write, and I don't have to put a shamanistic warrior in it . . . so it is a tremendous liberation. So, I am pleased with that series, and I think it is important; it's going to be very important, historically.

JP: A lot of the small presses in this country have been carrying it for a long time. And some of them have been doing very well with it, with good reputations of doing some of the best work in American literature, period.

LO: And look at what's happening today. The mid-list has virtually disappeared in the area of publishing. I know people, very successful writers, publishing with places like Knopf, for example, who aren't getting published anymore, because they're mid-list writers, literary writers, so they don't sell a lot of copies. Some small presses have folded

over the last several years, with some notable exceptions, like Holy Cow! Press . . .

JP: Gray Wolf . . .

LO: Gray Wolf, that's the one I was trying to think of, but university presses have stepped in. Nevada is publishing people like Frank Bergon and Gerald Haslam. University of California Press is publishing fiction now, Georgia, Colorado, Wesleyan, Minnesota, and of course Oklahoma. I think university presses are taking over.

I mean, when James Joyce, and people like Beckett, had to go to Paris to publish—they couldn't publish in Ireland or England—today I think writers can go to university or small presses, and have to more and more, which is not to say any of us are James Joyces or Becketts, but because these presses are filling that vacuum, that void, and obviously there is some money in it because they at least break even. Writers don't make any money off the books. But it's a chance to write what you really want to write, the way you want to write it, and know you'll have an audience.

JP: Very fortunate. Glad that it is so.

LO: And I'm very proud of the books in that series . . .

JP: And hopefully there'll be some new names in the list soon.

LO: There will be. Hopefully we'll have several new Native American novels within the next couple of years. If it works out.

JP: Well, we'll keep good thoughts about that.

Bone Game's

Terminal Plots and Healing Stories

Rochelle Venuto

Stories anchor identity. They explain where you come from and who you are; they provide important cultural information about how to live and behave; and they help create and maintain communities. Leslie Marmon Silko, in her essay “Language and Literature from a Pueblo Indian Perspective,” discusses the importance of storytelling and stories for Pueblo peoples:

The stories are always bringing us together, keeping this whole together, keeping this family together, keeping clan together. “Don’t go away, don’t isolate yourself, but come here, because we have all had these kinds of experiences.” And so there is this constant pulling together to resist the tendency to run or hide or separate oneself during a traumatic emotional experience. This separation not only endangers the group but the individual as well—one does not recover by oneself. (52)

According to Silko, Pueblo storytelling is thriving. Pueblo stories will be remembered and will continue to help connect Pueblo communities because of the peoples’ strong connection to each other and to their homeland. Stories and community, it seems, are mutually supportive—they create and sustain each other. What might happen, though, if one were to become isolated, geographically, culturally, or spiritually, from community and the web of sustaining stories? How can restoration be possible if, as Silko suggests, one cannot recover alone?

Louis Owens’ novel *Bone Game* (1994) explores these questions in the context of a mixedblood professor named Cole McCurtain. Recently divorced and relocated from New Mexico to a professorship in literature

at the University of California, Cole is isolated in Santa Cruz, alone and unhealthy, with appetite only for alcohol, and unconnected to his past and people. Separated from his community and its stories, he succumbs to a debilitating depression, leaving himself and his loved ones vulnerable to evil forces. The challenge for Cole is to move from outside to inside, from where he has neither stories nor community to where he has both. Cole must recreate his lost community to help form a protective web of stories; he must also assert a new story to counter the plot—with its insidious momentum—in which he has become entangled.

For Owens, “story” means much more than a children’s bedtime ritual—story structures existence. Language has the ability to bring things into being, like Thought-Woman in Silko’s *Ceremony* who “named things and/ as she named them/ they appeared” (1), and stories harness this power to create and shape the past, present, and future. Stories use language to determine destinies; they can be positive and life-affirming, or they can be hurtful and destructive. Positive and negative narratives each have the potential to shape the existence of a person or people; in Owens’ novels, characters struggle to assert one over the other in intense battles. The positive stories, like those Silko describes, strengthen community and promote cultural continuance; the pernicious stories, relying on what Gerald Vizenor in *Bearheart: The Heirship Chronicles* calls “terminal creeds”—beliefs imposing rigid definitions and stasis on the world—lead to stagnation and cultural demise. “Terminal creeds” fix Indian identity in clichés and reductive definitions, and prevent the adaptation and change that are necessary to survival. Once these beliefs have taken hold, as Vizenor puts it, “Some upsetting is necessary.”¹

One such upset occurs for Owens with the growth of a Native American literature that rejects the terminal creeds at the heart of Euro-America’s literary portrayal of Indians. In the introduction to *Other Destinies*, Owens’ critical study of American Indian novels, he suggests that American Indian novelists have “repudiated their assigned plots,” referring to a great deal of U. S. literature in which white authors deem Indians romantic but ultimately doomed. By becoming authors (an Indian destiny not included in the tragic script), and by creating their own narratives to counter the tragic stories written by whites and to imagine more positive futures for Indians, these writers are “emphatically making the Indian the hero of other destinies, other plots” (18). These new stories, unlike those with tragic plots, participate in storytelling in a positive sense, by mapping routes to healing and community rather than to oblivion and death.

In Owens’ fictional worlds, stories also play a crucial part; as the wise

character Luther says in Owens' second novel, *The Sharpest Sight* (1992), "it takes stories to keep the balance" (97). Owens' Indian characters have a solemn responsibility, not only to be aware of and monitor stories told about them, but also to create their own stories, and so to take charge of their own destinies. Taking responsibility—in both fiction and life—means participating in the narration of self and community, asserting control over one's own plot. In *The Sharpest Sight*, Cole struggles to reject the limiting and crippling definitions offered him by the stories of whites (embodied in the evil Jessard Deal), in order to find power in his mixedblood identity. In *Bone Game*, set twenty years later, Cole is somewhat more secure in his identity as a "Choctaw-Cherokee-Irish-Cajun, Mississippi and Oklahoma by way of New Mexico and California" (26), but once again becomes caught up in a terminal plot. In both instances, it is the strength of community and a web of stories that help reverse the narrative's deadly direction.

Just as Cole's healing is not an individual process, Cole's story in *Bone Game* goes beyond himself. His restoration to a community is a sign of his own healing, but it also brings about the renewal of the community as a whole. In a larger context, Cole's sickness is not an isolated case but is symptomatic of a pervasive crisis, embodied in the emptiness and alienation of individuals who desperately seek communication and community, and manifested in several types of violence, including the appropriation of Native cultures, environmental destruction, and the murders that drive the novel's plot. Cole's journey toward personal healing, then, is also part of a larger process of recovery: the restoration of order to an out-of-balance world through an acceptance of responsibility for that world.

Bone Game explores the issue of responsibility—accepting responsibility for the past, and taking responsibility in the present, in order to imagine and create a desirable future—by placing a modernist project and a Native American literary tradition in dialogue with each other: Owens' text echoes contemporary Indian novels like Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* and N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*, as well as one of the defining texts of the modernist period, T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, in its language, images, and structure. The healing journeys depicted in these Native American novels and the mythic structure of *The Waste Land*, in which the knight of the grail romance restores the Fisher King, bringing renewed fertility to a dry land, serve as metanarratives that provide structure for the novel's movement toward restoration. Owens, though, locates true responsibility not in the restorative power of sacrifice (represented in Eliot, for instance, by his allusions to Christian mythol-

ogy's crucifixion or Egyptian mythology's Osiris), which in Owens' novel leads only to further fragmentation and violence. One person cannot save the community; instead, salvation lies in the creation and maintenance of community.

The Indian novels echoed in *Bone Game* provide a context for Cole's journey, linking him at crucial moments with the healing stories he needs, stories that focus on the importance of community, the need to maintain balance between good and evil, and the power of stories themselves. These novels also play a crucial part in Owens' own project: like much of modernist literature, *Bone Game* attempts to create a coherent whole out of fragmentation. Owens' strategy in this endeavor reflects Eliot's in *The Waste Land*: "These fragments I have shored against my ruins." Composed of bits and pieces of narration, fragments filtered through ambiguous and unnamed consciousnesses, dreams mixed with reality, and past fused with present, *Bone Game* weaves together a story with literary fragments, through a constant stream of references not only to Native American literature and T. S. Eliot but also to James Fenimore Cooper, William Carlos Williams, Robert Frost, Mark Twain, and Matthew Arnold. The literary fragments from U. S. and British authors, however, Owens often designates as part of white stories, important to know and recognize in order to avoid their tragic plots but not central to the novel's meaning. In contrast, Owens creates a dynamic and syncretic web of Native American stories, emphasizing the value of these connections to counter the destructive forces of separation and division and highlighting the need for new stories to continue the restoration of fragmented identities and cultures.

Bone Game's first epigraph, a pair of announcements delivered in the terse style of a police blotter, demonstrates the need for stories to help make meaning out of existence. Providing powerful evidence of the diseased condition of Santa Cruz, California, these two instances of violence are recounted in the present tense, giving them both a sense of urgency and immediacy, despite the 181 years that separate them. Yet except for geographical location and violent death, they appear to have little in common:

October 15, 1812. *Government Surgeon Manuel Quijano, accompanied by six armed men, is dispatched from the presidio in Monterey with orders to exhume the body of Padre Andrés Quintana at the mission of Santa Cruz, La Exaltación de la Santa Cruz. The priest is found to have been murdered, tortured in pudendis, and hanged.*

November 1, 1993. *The dismembered body of a young*

*woman begins washing ashore on the beaches of Santa Cruz,
California.*

We are given no context, no means to assimilate this comparison in a meaningful way—it is Owens' narrative that makes the connection clear, that gives these announcements shape, direction, and meaning. This epigraph anticipates the novel's palimpsest structure, in which the two events, both references to actual events in Santa Cruz history, unite in the immediate present.

The torture and murder of Padre Andrés Quintana in 1812 at the Santa Cruz mission is one of the best documented accounts of assassinations of mission priests by their Indian neophytes. The event was recorded in an 1877 interview of Lorenzo Asisara, the son of Venancio Asisara, one of the conspirators.² Though Padre Quintana in colonial histories is often depicted as a heroic martyr, Lorenzo describes him in quite different terms. One of his concluding remarks, that the Spanish Fathers "*eran muy crueles*"—were very cruel—to the Indians, becomes a refrain in Owens' novel. Owens overlays this early nineteenth-century event with a period in the 1970s, when Santa Cruz attained notoriety as "Murder Capital of the World" due to the simultaneous activity of several serial killers, two of whom, Edmund Kemper and Herbert Mullin, provide models for the characters Paul Kantner and Robert Malin in *Bone Game*. Kemper killed eight women, including his mother; Mullin described his thirteen slayings as human sacrifices needed to prevent a cataclysmic earthquake along the San Andreas fault, believing he was conditioned by his family to receive overwhelming telepathic messages telling him to kill.

The coalescence of these two periods in the present of the novel is not simply coincidental; neither is one merely a reflection of, or repetition of, the other. Instead, the historical violence in part determines the fact and the direction of the present violence, while the existence of less obvious violence in the present—the appropriation of Native American spiritualities, the excision of history from the present moment, and environmental devastation in which "White men come and murder the great trees, bleeding them into rich men's homes" (6)—creates the conditions necessary for this orchestration.

Venancio Asisara sets the plot in motion by communicating through dreams to an uncomprehending Cole, using these dreams to make Cole experience firsthand the priest's cruelty and his murder and realize Venancio's identity and purpose. Significantly, it is not the murdered priest who awakens to enact revenge, but the Indian who has an intimate link to the land and continues to experience the loss sustained by his people. He haunts the present moment, appearing in the form of a bear,

or in his traditional gambler costume, painted half white and half black. Angry and resentful at waking up to a world in which he seems to have no place, Venancio desires to play the bone game of the title, to gamble for the return of his lost world. Though Onatima, a transparent old Choctaw medicine woman on the brink of another world, tells Venancio in a dream that his world is gone, that he cannot win it back, the novel's second epigraph infers otherwise. Also in the present tense, it suggests that despite the arrival of the priests and their destructive and condescendingly paternal treatment of the Indians, the rightful home of these Indians persists: "Children. *Neófitos*. *Bestes*. And still it is the same sky, the same night arched like a reed house, the stars of their birth." It is this fundamental contradiction—the persistence of the land and the disappearance of a world—that causes Venancio's rage. Cole dreams: "Venancio will never die, will wander between worlds, his hate too strong for death, the violence of his people's life taken by the invaders become a mark upon the very earth" (66).

Bone Game depicts a world in which past and present exist simultaneously, reflecting not a linear progressive mode of temporal understanding in which history is defined as past events, but a more integrated epistemology in which, as the character Uncle Luther informs us, "It's all one time" (85). Alex, Cole's friend and colleague, explains that for the local Ohlone tribe, ". . . there wasn't any history, Cole, no yesterday. There was only sacred time—the time of creation—and today, with nothing in between. And then the Spanish came and taught them history and death in a single moment" (54). Everyone—Venancio and Cole, past and present—is in this one place together, but no one is telling Venancio's story. Stories integrate the past into the present in a healthy way; Venancio, uninvited, explodes into the present. A linear view of history not only is inadequate to describe the reality of the novel, but also is dangerous, for it allows the past to be forgotten and subsequently rewritten, so that the history of violence toward Native Americans may be replaced with a nostalgic, romantic view of Indians and mission life—the very stories that project no present or future for Native Americans. In the Santa Cruz of the novel, under the guise of enlightened liberalism, Native American history is erased in order to appropriate Native identity, religious traditions, and spirituality for personal enlightenment. According to Cole, even the founders of the American Indian Movement are "running sweat ceremonies for crystal gazers in Santa Cruz" (31). The wholesale appropriation of Native American religious traditions by a New Age spiritualism thrives in this community, where people have succumbed to what Cole calls "ethnostalgia" (43), a condition in which

Indians are seen as “noble and mystical and, most important of all, impotent and doomed” so that in the supposed absence of real Indians “whites can put on beads and leather and feathers and shed a little tear and be Indians” (42–43). Cole’s students, caught up in the drama of tragic stories of a vanishing people, want desperately to see Nicholas Black Elk in the romanticized image created by John Neihardt in *Black Elk Speaks*, and are disappointed and hurt when Cole attempts to rescue Nicholas Black Elk from this vision. Motivated by a sense of spiritual emptiness, these students fall victim to charlatans who exploit Indian cultures for financial gain: “On weekends they found a feathered huckster to take their hundred bucks for a sweat ceremony or three hundred for a vision quest, and they returned hungry and dazed with an Indian name like Willow or Redbird” (21). In their romanticization and appropriation of Indian identity and culture, they imagine themselves “reincarnations of Crazy Horse and descendants of Indian princesses” (21) and proudly trace their heritage to a Cherokee great-grandmother, never to a member of a less renowned tribe.

This travesty of Native American cultures that surrounds Cole in Santa Cruz is a poor substitute for real community, the loss of which is both indicative of Cole’s crisis and a primary reason for his continued alienation. Cole has excised his family and friends from his life: in New Mexico he has a daughter, Abby, who loves him, and a former wife who wants to be his friend; in Mississippi he has his father Hoey, his Uncle Luther, and the medicine-woman Onatima, all of whom in *The Sharpest Sight* participated actively in helping bring about Cole’s recovery. In the earlier novel, this community helps Cole to recover his sense of self and his Choctaw heritage along with his brother Attis’ missing bones; the novel ends with a journey in which Cole and Hoey take Attis’ bones home to Mississippi, a pilgrimage that also brings Cole closer and closer to a sense of place and belonging. In *Bone Game*, Cole’s isolation from his loved ones is an attempt to escape his own past, and mirrors a larger excision of history. Though Cole can recognize and disapprove of Californians who have completely excised the past from their present existence—“Californians don’t like to hear about their sordid pasts. No one’s supposed to even have a past in California. It’s considered in poor taste” (178)—Cole’s move to California is a “move [of] a thousand miles to hide from people” (12).

Cole needs to re-establish a link to his history through the communities he has chosen to forget; his healing requires collective strength, and must take place in a communal, rather than individual, context. When he tries to cure himself, he fails. Before leaving New Mexico, Cole makes a

solitary pilgrimage to “the sacred middle place,” the kiva at Cueloze. Unlike the kiva in *Ceremony* where Tayo is welcomed back into community and health, however, this kiva is empty and cold. Though Cole lies on his back in its center, an act which should orient him in relation to the universe, everything feels unfamiliar, unrelated. Even the stars, which should provide for Cole a familiar guiding pattern, like Old Betonie’s stars that lead Tayo through the healing process in *Ceremony*, only reflect his spiritual emptiness: “Beyond the swirling snow, the stars were holes in the dark, not relations in the sky, and he felt the immensity of his solitude” (75). This journey for Cole ends not in restoration of health but in a bungled suicide attempt, perhaps only unsuccessful due to Luther’s intervention—Onatima hints rather mysteriously that Luther helped change Cole’s story in some way when he “helped last winter” (71)—and in Cole’s departure for California. Onatima, who sees Cole’s situation and condition in her dreams, urges Luther to help his nephew once again: “No one can do these things alone; everybody needs help” (71). Cole does need help; he needs Onatima, Luther, and his community. He needs stories that will not end tragically, that will save him and restore the community. Whereas in *The Sharpest Sight* Cole journeyed back to Luther’s cabin on the Yazoo River in Mississippi to reconnect with his place in the world and with his Choctaw heritage, this time the problem is larger and more complex, involving the history, land, and people of his new geographical locale as well as his own crisis. Because this trouble cannot be addressed elsewhere, Cole’s community comes to him.

Alex Yazzie, the first to arrive, seems designed by Owens to counter the tragic narratives threatening to engulf Cole. A perfect foil to Vizenor’s “terminal creeds,” Yazzie is a cross-dressing Navajo Professor of Anthropology, the only other Indian on the UCSC faculty, and a trickster (as Cole himself recognizes). In a Vizenoresque move, Alex rejects the terminal creed of sexual preference: “By the way, I told you I’m not gay, and don’t call me bisexual either. Definitions are a form of oppression, right, Mister Indian? I prefer infinities to definitions” (46). Clearly, though, Alex is rooted in his Navajo identity and traditional values. He offers pollen to the deer he accidentally kills when it jumps in front of his truck; he listens when in his dream he is directed to make seven arrows with deer sinew. When Cole accuses him of being part of the “New Native American Lost Generation, the academic Indian diaspora,” Alex replies, “I refuse to be deracinated” (46).

Alex, then, with his deeply traditional values and dynamic identity, his boundless humor and playfulness, is in an excellent position to tease Cole out of his melancholy. On first meeting they give a magnificent

impromptu performance that exposes the university administration's romantic, mystical notion of Indians and its fear of being politically incorrect. Called from his office for an "Indian emergency" at Faculty Housing, Cole arrives on the scene to find Alex in an Evan Picone pleated black skirt dressing the deer he has killed. Alex plays the part of the primitive savage for his awe-struck audience, chanting, dancing, painting his face and chest with blood, offering "the dramatic profile of a warrior," and leaving them gasping things like, "It's okay. He's an Indian" (28). Cole is brought in as a kind of mediator, to translate for the distraught Vice Chancellor Spanner who cannot seem to imagine the possibility of direct communication with an Indian, or that a Professor of Anthropology at UCSC just might speak English. Cole immediately enters into the spirit of the situation, playing on Indian stereotypes and on the fears and fantasies of the audience:

"We have to be very, very careful. By the way he's painted himself, I can tell that this man is a Navajo *heyokah*, a sacred warrior-clown. They're notoriously volatile. You should also be aware that once a Navajo has completed his deer dance, he's bonded with the animal spirit. And Navajos are well-known in the Indian community for becoming insanely violent if separated from their meat once they've bonded" (27).

Their slowdance in Cole's cabin, seemingly out of character for Cole, is part of Alex's trickster antics, but is also significant for Cole as one of the first moments of connection he has experienced in Santa Cruz.

Cole's newfound community, reflective of the dynamic view of Indian identity represented by Alex, grows as his daughter Abby arrives unexpectedly from New Mexico, Onatima journeys by plane and taxi, and Luther and Hoey take the long route, driving from Mississippi via Gallup, New Mexico, all to take an active part in the story. Cole's dirty, empty house, where he had been reduced to the companionship of a ceramic buffalo named Bill, transforms into a vibrant, healthy communal space. Even a giant and ferocious crack-house puppy named Custer, a present from Alex, adds to the new coziness. Alex also organizes a sweat and a Native American Church ceremony which draw more helpers—Emil Redbull, who wears a "Don't worry be Hopi" tee-shirt and prays in Lakota, and Great Uncle Emmet, who tells them that on the Peyote Road "It don't matter what religion you got, or what tribe" (196). Robert Jim, though he remains on the Navajo Reservation and never actually sets foot near Cole's house, is also part of this intimate group: he is keeping track of the story, and he gives Luther and Hoey pollen to add to Cole's medicine pouch. This dynamic, syncretic community, crossing boundaries

usually delineated by tribe, geography, and blood, gives Cole the strength to overcome his sickness. As Onatima tells Abby, "That's where real power comes from, from all of us—full-bloods and mixedbloods, those who live together and those who live apart" (174).

Cole needs the support and aid of this community, but he cannot rely solely on their strength; he must also participate actively in the healing process, by taking responsibility and directing the plot away from the tragic ending. Because Cole's story is part of something that goes beyond his individual self, involving the lives and deaths of others, it is particularly urgent that he gain control of it. On some level, Cole does understand his role in determining the outcome of events; his glimmers of insight, however, are too frequently extinguished in Tecate and Jack Daniels: "Somewhere in that story [of the dismembered woman] was a moment of shrieking horror so great it struck at his soul. And again, he felt the strange sense of responsibility, a terrible weight. He tipped the bottle and then lifted the can, waiting for the combination to wash away the image of the painted man" (21). Onatima reproaches Cole for letting himself be trapped in the white story of the drunken Indian: "That's the worst Indian cliché of all. It's time to quit feeling sorry for yourself and start thinking about this situation here. It's your story, after all, and people are dying" (145); ultimately, Cole is able to take her advice, extricate himself from the incapacitating stereotype, and face the challenge. When Alex suggests they get away from Ohlone prayer sticks made with human flesh (left for Cole by one of the serial killers), bear tracks, and murders, and take jobs teaching five classes of composition at Navajo Community College, Cole dryly replies "Dismemberment is preferable. Besides, we could leave, but this thing would still be going on" (134).

Cole's recognition of his responsibility, however, must be followed by some kind of action; he must determine how to redirect Venancio's intended plot. Cole teaches two courses at the university, modernism and Native American Literature, and both provide him with potential models for such action. He identifies strongly with modernist literature and its optimistic search for meaning—something he recognizes from reservation life: "He loved the painful sincerity of the modernists, how hard they had tried to find the questions and then answer them. Their poignant attempts to rediscover or replace God attracted him. Like some of the old men and women he'd met on reservations, they knew they had lost something precious and indispensable and they lived in a world bereft and haunted. But they believed that what they'd lost was still there, somewhere, if they could only understand the clues. The solution was just out of reach" (39). Cole's passion for modernist literature and his course "with all the

requisite talk of hanged gods and Christ and human responsibility” (21) reflect his own existence in this haunted world. The drunken but resonant lecture he gives in this class emphasizes the values of sacrifice, commitment, and responsibility, referencing Native American cultures as well as paradigmatic texts in the European tradition:

What does it mean to say God gave his only begotten son, that Christ died for your sins, that Abraham would cut the throat of his child, that Osiris was torn to pieces so that his dick would fertilize the Nile. . . . What is the agony in the garden, in stony places, but a promise we make to the god of life? Look, I offer that which is most valuable as proof of my commitment to you. I offer this tobacco, this red cloth, my daughter—Iphigenia—my son, Jesus—my precious lamb so that new life will spring forth. I offer myself, this pain. Pierced and hung from the sacred cross of the Sun Dance tree. These hundred pieces of my flesh. That my people may live. It is our violent and bloody and holy and wonderful insistence that death is not an end but a beginning, that we have a profound and infinite commitment to the continuum we inhabit, that above all, we accept responsibility for our place on earth. (40)

The rambling oratory excerpted here, a web of cross-cultural connections and a collection of fragments rivaling Eliot’s own, is part of Cole’s attempt to piece together his own ruined world in order to create order and meaning. Taking responsibility through pain and sacrifice, in any tradition, Cole seems to say, is necessary for renewal and life. Although Cole understands the necessity for commitment and responsibility, he has not yet integrated them into his own life, and does not understand the implications of his insistence on pain and violence. Given his own confused state, it is not surprising that two of Cole’s students are gravely misled by lectures such as this one. Paul Kantner and Robert Malin both use Cole’s depictions of modernism and responsibility in order to justify their multiple murders.

Paul Kantner, like Cole, identifies with the modernists; like Cole, he uses them to try to create meaning in his life. His application of modernist stories, however, leads him not to create, but to destroy, the possibility of a sustaining community. Like the modernists, like the “fairy ring” of redwood trees in Elfland he points out to Abby, Paul Kantner has an “empty center” (183). He holds women accountable for his inner emptiness, sense of abandonment, and isolation. An older undergraduate and veteran of the Army special forces, Kantner’s intense identification with the alienation of T. S. Eliot’s J. Alfred Prufrock reflects his resentment and rage at women, including his mother, for their failure to

reach out to him in a meaningful way: "I do not think that they will sing to me, he says, and he's right. They never do. They never, ever do" (23). His murders are a misguided attempt at creating community; he buries the heads of his victims in his back yard, facing his bedroom: "Every night I talk to them. I say affectionate things, like you would say to a girlfriend or even a wife. Death never entered into it, you have to understand; death's a transition I didn't pay attention to. I was trying to establish a relationship, that's all. Just a relationship. Is that so fucking much to ask?" (220). Kantner's inability to establish meaningful communication results in frustration and rage at language itself: "I'm sick of these professors playing their language games. . . . they don't know a fucking thing about reality, do they? . . . Sometimes I want to stick a knife in their guts and ask them what that signifies" (172). His world is far from the rich signifying world of Luther, for whom a street called Coal Avenue is a "sign" because, he tells Hoey, "It's like your boy's name" (113) (though poor Hoey can only sigh, "It's a street sign" [114]). Kantner also uses language to make connections, but these connections are made and maintained through violence. His story is a destructive rather than a creative force; his plot must end in death. Onatima senses Kantner's desire to entrap Abby in his fatal script:

Perhaps the man who frightened you today wants to make you see yourself only through his eyes, so that you can only imagine yourself from outside the window looking in. That way, every time you look in a mirror you will see only what the man sees. You will always be outside yourself, and your own reflection will be a trap. When that happens we become like ghosts who can't see our own bodies. Then we have to make others see us so we can know we exist, or we have to use others' lives as our own. That's what they want. It's a matter of power. They would imprison us in their vision and their stories, and we can't let them do that. We have to have our own stories. (140)

Onatima designates Kantner, in his struggle for narrative authority over Abby's identity, as one of "them" not simply because he is a man but because of his powerful position in a hierarchy based on gender and race. Kantner's praise of the Frost poem "about the spider and the moth" (22)—a sonnet called "Design" in which a white spider entraps a white moth on a white flower—reflects his implication in white stories, whose deadly power is all the more dangerous for its invisibility.

While Kantner's murders are symptomatic of his "psycho-sexual thing with women" (224), Robert Malin's motivations stem from his problematic relationship to Indianness; trapped in a rigidly romantic view

of Indians, Malin drives the plot toward stasis and death. Malin espouses positive values he perceives as Native American: he believes in living in harmony and balance with Nature, in the connectedness of all things, and in responsibility for the past and future. "That's what I've learned from Native Americans," he tells Abby, "Every minute element is interrelated inextricably with every other element, and if we screw up one tiny part we screw it all up. Then we have to restore the balance somehow, make offerings, and propitiate the only forces that can help us, the way Native Americans have always known we must. The spirits guide us" (103). Yet Robert's view of Indians has little to do with any concrete reality, and much to do with his own fanciful visions. Though Alex attempts to disabuse Robert of his romantic notions by reminding him of poverty on reservations and the high suicide rate of Indian teenagers, Robert refuses to relinquish his idyllic vision. This "Natty Bumppo of Santa Cruz," as Cole calls him, wants to be more Indian than the Indians, and blatantly appropriates Native American spirituality to the point where he feels comfortable dictating to Abby what she should think and feel as an Indian. Robert's murders are due in part to Venancio's influence, but he is far from an innocent vessel acting out Venancio's orders; he is susceptible to the dreams Venancio sends because of his own beliefs about guilt, sacrifice, and Indian spirituality. Robert's appropriation of Indian culture reaches its ultimate expression in his adoption of the black and white costume of the gambler to commit his murders. Owens' logic is clear: Malin's seemingly benign appropriation of Native American belief systems reveals an essential, and volatile, malignancy.

Malin combines his romantic and reductionist view of Indians with a faith in the redemptive power of making painful sacrifices and forfeiting that which is valued or loved—a belief system structured by modernist stories and similar to that described by Cole and Kantner. He connects concepts from Cole's modernist lectures with his own research on the apocalyptic, new-age teachings of Edgar Cayce.³ In Malin's logic of white guilt, murder compensates for culpability. He believes that his thirteen "sacrifices" have prevented a cataclysmic earthquake, that he is taking responsibility while others shirk it:

That's what everyone does. They build homes, communities, towns, and they think walls will protect them from their own guilt, their past, that they won't have to pay what they owe. They think they can do all those terrible things and then go home to their families and lock their doors and everything will be all right. Or they think that just because

they didn't personally do those things, they're innocent. They don't understand that somebody has to accept responsibility, somebody has to finally say no and do something about it. It just can't go on forever that way. (235)

The fact that Malin believes he acts in a committed, responsible manner signals the danger of an oversimplified understanding of the accountability of the present to, and for, the past. In Robert's formulation, responsibility is a function of causality, and taking responsibility means looking to the past to assign blame; a healthy sense of responsibility, on the other hand, is related to duty. Taking responsibility in this sense means looking to the future to instigate positive change, not to the past to determine guilt.

The models that Cole, Kantner, and Malin derive from modernist stories tend to neglect the importance of community in favor of individual action, and to rely on the easy fix of a misguided sacrifice, in which murder is meant to balance genocide; plots that follow these models must end in death. Luther and Hoey, however, provide a different model. Their seemingly tangential trip westward is actually at the novel's heart. Providing an example of responsibility and redemption both healthy and effective, Hoey and Luther plot their way through the Southwest and redirect a terminal story toward individual and communal restoration. Robert Jim, who lives on the Navajo reservation and who helps guide Luther and Hoey on their trip, discerns that their journey is in fact intimately related to Cole's story: "I think it's all connected, what they're doing here on the reservation and over there where you're going. That's why you two come" (90).

Robert Jim's involvement illustrates that, in fact, everything is connected; the story unfolding in Santa Cruz is related to stories unfolding in the Navajo, Pueblo, and Hopi country through which they travel, where sacred geography and stories compete with the maps and stories of whites—a geography of killing and "stories about death" (89). In these white stories, land and people are contaminated by the invasion of nuclear laboratories and testing sites, a museum in Albuquerque devoted to atomic bombs celebrates institutionalized killing, and the Navajo Flu, or *hantavirus*—Luther calling attention to the irony that *hanta* means "white" in Choctaw—is killing Indians. In their journey through Gallup, Hoey and Luther find an "Indian place" where the white stories have won—where pawnshops and bars like the Teepee Room (its blue-lipped bartender reminiscent of the albino of *House Made of Dawn*) help rich white men get even richer by exploiting Indians, and alcohol kills Indians physically and spiritually. "I didn't know," Luther says, "I never knew.

This is where it begins" (113). The evil in this place they call "witchery," the term used in *Ceremony* to describe the force that seeks to destroy Tayo through separation and violence. Hoey and Luther, driving outside Gallup, witness an instance of this witchery when they see men in a dark van forcibly abduct a woman, one among many "shadowy forms" rising from a field in a morning-after alcoholic haze. Hoey asks, "Does somebody stop those guys?" and Luther replies with an acknowledgment of their responsibility, "I think maybe we do" (118).

Luther and Hoey not only concede their responsibility; their comprehension of the nature of their adversary and the correct manner in which to confront it allows them successfully to change the plot of the witches' story for the kidnapped woman, which would have ended with the witches selling her in California. The leader of these witches is Emo, the purveyor of witchery in *Ceremony*, who at the conclusion of Silko's novel is still alive and evil, but allegedly gone to California. While the witches are stuck in a public restroom, perhaps due to Luther's magical intervention, perhaps only to the huge amount of beer they have consumed ("I never pissed this long in my life, Emo" [126]), Hoey and Luther catch up to them. Despite Luther's jesting insistence that Hoey "shoot these witches," Hoey refrains from killing Emo and his cohorts, effectively ending the cycle of violence by refusing to participate in it. Like Francisco in *House Made of Dawn*, Hoey and Luther recognize that in order to neutralize the power of evil, its presence must be recognized and acknowledged; they do not make the same mistake as Abel, who attempts by killing the albino to eradicate an evil that cannot be destroyed. Hoey reminds his uncle, "Remember what you always said about evil? . . . How you can't kill it, and it's the white man's way to try? That all we can do is be conscious of it?" (154). Leaving the witches naked and their van stuck in a sand bank, Hoey and Luther deal with evil in a way that restores the delicate balance of the world. They fulfill their responsibility by making the presence of these witches known; they recognize them and "pretty soon everybody will" (154). Their duty performed, the two take the woman home, a resolution that mirrors Cole's movement in the novel toward home and healing. Robert Jim, who has a hand in this healing too, restores the identity of the previously anonymous woman by speaking her name—Kate Begay. He buys her clean clothes, and advises her to tell her story to her family: ". . . remember that you must tell everything. The people have to know the whole story" (169). Her story will become part of the web of stories that binds and protects her community.

In order to reach the point where he, too, can return home, Cole needs a great deal more than a ride and clean clothes—in order to sort out the

confusing web of killing and to successfully resolve it, he needs to be able to tell his own story. Cole, however, is alienated from the language that would enable him to determine his own plot. This alienation excludes him from prayer's healing power: in the sweat ceremony, the first organized effort to help Cole toward resolution, Cole perceives Choctaw phrases as "foreign," and fails to muster even English words to his aid: "Cole opened his mouth and only silence was there. He tried to form the words of a prayer in his mind, but his thoughts remained shapeless, inarticulate" (163). Before he can put his life in order, Cole must become articulate; he must find language with which to shape his own story.

Cole's sickness reaches its nadir in the peyote vision he experiences after the Native American Church service, the second ceremony organized by Alex to aid him, but this ceremony also contributes substantially to Cole's recovery. Chaotic and confused, the vision fills Cole with fear and panic. Vomiting "what felt like his life" on the ground, and feeling "a deep hole in his center" (198), Cole seems to comprehend fully the extent of his sickness, his absolute emptiness. Although he cannot understand his place in the story, seeing once more the "unknown pattern of stars wheel[ing] madly across the sky" (198), the vision causes Cole finally to confront the bear and the painted man who are both Venancio, as well as his feelings about his brother Attis' death. Cole is made to experience the simultaneity of time when he is pursued by the bear "through time but not space" (199) back to the gambler's own village, and to see the connectedness of place and people: the Yazoo and the Salinas rivers, the gambler and Attis and Luther. The vision's healing power is manifested in the medicine pouch, which Luther gives Cole in the vision and remains around his neck upon awakening. This pouch, containing two arrowheads and a stone doll, had been a present from Attis, and the young Cole had come to appreciate its strength in the events of *The Sharpest Sight*. Though Cole had considered it lost, Onatima informs him that "Nothing's lost, Grandson" (208), suggesting the possibility, and imminence, of his complete recovery. In this vision, for the first time, Attis becomes a source of strength, pulling Cole from the earth "with a force beyond any he has ever known" and saving him from Venancio and from surrender to "the perfect logic of his death, the absurdity of forestalling the event of it" (202). In this moment, Cole sees and rejects a terminal creed; he opens himself up to other possibilities and destinies.

Cole's acceptance of responsibility brings resolution to his crisis and to the novel. Cole finally takes control of the story by speaking the name of Venancio Asisara, which, he explains, was exactly what Venancio had "wanted all the time" (243). Cole's act of naming Santa Cruz's unac-

knowledgeable past, demonstrating his acceptance of a temporality where the past is not excised from the present but coexists with it as an acknowledged and named presence, effectively restores order and coherence to his life, and ends the cycle of violence. With the establishment of a community of old and new friends and family, the wasteland period of Cole's life comes to an end. He returns home to New Mexico, where an "afternoon thunderstorm, mixing wet spring snow and freezing rain" (241) symbolically ends his spiritual drought, and where a sunset in which "the vapor looked like a cloud of yellow-orange pollen that spread until it covered everything they could see" (243), representing the restoration of life and fertility to the land, reflects his own renewal. Cole will now live with Abby and Alex, who have also formed their own positive romantic connection; Alex is undergoing a nine-day Navajo healing ceremony, led by none other than Robert Jim, for the gunshot wounds inflicted by Robert Malin; and Hoey, Luther, and Onatima, though they are asked to stay, insist on returning home to Mississippi to be close to the bones of their people.

Although the novel ends with both killers dead—Robert kills Paul and Abby kills Robert in self-defense—the witchery in this novel, as in *Ceremony* and *The Sharpest Sight*, is only dead "for now." The evil set in motion in the past is still at large; it cannot be destroyed or brought to justice in the usual sense. The final paragraph of the novel shows the dark consciousness of Venancio still hovering over the seemingly peaceful landscape of Santa Cruz: "It is a world so like his own, of black streams and changeless skies. His shadow falls across the town and bay, undulating with the slow waves. *Eran muy crueles*." Venancio's continued presence in the landscape illustrates his existence in a non-linear time, where the past is not over; it also demonstrates that evil, which will always exist, must be acknowledged in order to maintain the world's balance. Venancio's eternal existence suggests, too, that a meaningful connection to history is never fully accomplished, but instead is an unending process. While redemptive sacrifice may have value in certain contexts, if used irresponsibly to offset or counteract evil, it runs the risks of canceling out the past and merely recreating the atrocity for which it is meant to atone. A truly responsible relationship to history involves instead a continual articulation and re-articulation of the presence of the past through the creation of stories. Unlike the rewriting of history practiced in the Santa Cruz of the novel, stories do not excise the past; instead, they recognize its place and value in the present: to provide continuity, meaning, and guidance necessary for existence in the world.

Cole's responsibility, then, does not end with his acknowledgment of

Venancio; like Kate Begay he must tell everyone his story, without leaving anything out. All signs indicate that Cole will accomplish this through writing, demonstrating his renewed ability to assert his own plot. In the earlier part of the novel, Cole's alienation from writing indicates the profundity of his sickness, even his own books striking him as "someone else's words" (19). Just before the Native American Church ceremony, however, he begins to recognize writing as part of his responsibility: "For the first time in ages, he considered the writing he hadn't done, surprised to realize that he hadn't even thought of writing since he'd moved, until that moment hadn't even felt guilty about not doing it" (195). At the novel's resolution, Luther wonders why his nephew "ain't wrote no more of them books? You used to write good stories," and offers Cole this counsel: "They got too many stories about us. We need to write books about them now. Get even" (226).

Louis Owens in a sense does "get even" in *Bone Game*'s multivalent critique of Santa Cruz and the appropriation of Native identities and spirituality, but the novel goes well beyond the retribution Luther half-jokingly proposes. Owens' self-conscious participation in a conversation with other Native American novelists effectively anchors *Bone Game* in a Native American literary discourse, ties it explicitly to themes of deracination, identity, and healing, and lays the structural groundwork for a cyclical journey toward home and recovery. Providing a framework for the creation of a healthy and productive responsibility to history and to place, this novel depicts recovery, renewal, and the healing of fragmented identities and cultures. Rejecting tragic scripts in favor of syncretic communities, it helps plot viable, meaningful, and responsible futures.

NOTES

¹Neal Bowers and Charles L. P. Silet, "An Interview with Gerald Vizenor," *MELUS* 8:1 (1981): 45-47.

²Edward D. Castillo translated this interview into English, and published the edited version, with introductions, in two parts: "The Assassination of Padre Andrés Quintana by the Indians of Mission Santa Cruz in 1812: The Narrative of Lorenzo Asisara," *California History* 68.3 (Fall 1989): 116-25 and "An Indian Account of the Decline and Collapse of Mexico's Hegemony over the Missionized Indians of California," *American Indian Quarterly* 13.4 (Fall 1989): 391-408.

³Not merely a fictional character, Edgar Cayce (1877-1945) addressed such

topics as Atlantis, meditation, psychic awareness, dreams, and revelation in his writing, which was frequently published by The Association for Research and Enlightenment, located in Virginia Beach, Virginia.

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The Syncretic Impulse: Louis Owens' Use of Autobiography, Ethnology, and Blended Mythologies in The Sharpest Sight

Margaret Dwyer

Attis McCurtain spun in the river, riding the black flood, aware of the branches that trailed over his face and touched his body, spinning in the current of the night toward something he could feel coming closer, rising up to meet him. He knew he was dead . . .

[Louis Owens, *The Sharpest Sight*]

The Sharpest Sight, Louis Owens' second novel, is set in California and Mississippi and follows the progress of Cole McCurtain and Mundo Morales as they search for the body of and murderer of Attis McCurtain, Mundo's best friend and Cole's older brother. Though it is literary, this novel has been discussed in mainstream newspaper reviews primarily as a murder mystery with designs on the territory laid out by Tony Hillerman.¹ Early academic journal reviews of *The Sharpest Sight* view the text within the genres of the Native American novel, the western, and the murder mystery. Melissa Hearn examined it as a murder mystery thriller which is "grounded in Native tradition and history" (21). Helen Jaskoski comments on Owens' use of a style reminiscent of modernist American literary masters (1546). Robert Gish notes his mixing of "realism and magic realism, the Western and mystery genres" and the similarities between Owens' mixedblood background and that of his "fictive personae," the family of protagonist Cole McCurtain (433). In "Who Gets To Tell Their Stories?" James Kincaid looked at the works of several American Indian authors, and suggests books such as *The Sharpest Sight*, where the mystery is "entwined with an artfully interfolded story of how knowledge is reached, constructed, approximated or just plain faked" (26), will lead to a new vision of American Indian fiction by mainstream

America. No academic essays had been published on this text at the time of this writing.

This elegiac novel is centered on the McCurtain family, which is mixedblood Choctaw, Cherokee, and Irish. First names of the fictional family are drawn from Owens' real family, and Onatima and Attis are suggested by his grandmother Mahala and his older brother Gene:

Though I used both my father's and grandfather's real names and a great deal of our family history in that book, and though it is above all a work of fiction, it is a novel written largely for my older brother, who had returned from a third tour of duty in Vietnam only to vanish. . . . Only years later, after *The Sharpest Sight* was published, did we reestablish contact. He'd seen the book in a store in Arkansas, bought and read it, and realized it was to a great extent about him. So he called my sister to find out where I was. That's how we learned he had disappeared into the Ozark Mountains for two decades. (*Autobiography* 297; "Motion of Fire and Form" 92)

The novel's Mississippi Choctaw focus comes from Owens' memory of his early life in Mississippi, punctuated with trips to California, where he was born. Extended childhood stays at his grandparent's home next to the Yazoo River contributed to the characters of Luther and Onatima and the landscape of the novel. His family moved permanently to California when he was about seven years old (*Autobiography* 281). The novel is also informed by Owens' research into history and culture, and the careful reader can find almost all of the Choctaw ingredients defined throughout the text. But understanding the Choctaw cultural references is only part of the story. Within *The Sharpest Sight* exists a considerable subtext that requires a reader to know something about Phrygian and Roman mythology. The Grail Romance is also represented, as is a healthy smattering of modernist American poetry and the Calvinist doctrine of Jonathan Edwards. Critics, perhaps with set expectations, have simply failed to notice or take into account some or most of these elements, especially if they pigeon-holed it as a Native American novel.

The method used by Owens to create this syncretic novel might be best identified as *bricolage*, the "means at hand." As defined by Lévi-Strauss in *The Savage Mind*, a *bricoleur* uses elements that are:

collected or retained on the principle that "they may always come in handy." Such elements are specialized up to a point, sufficiently for the "bricoleur" not to need the equipment and knowledge of all trades and professions, but not enough for each of them to have only one definite and determinate use. They each represent a set of

actual and possible relations: they are “operators” but they can be used for any operations of the same type. (18)

Bricolage is taken a step further by Derrida, who drew on Lévi-Strauss’ use of “bricoleur” in his essay “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences.” Derrida focused particularly on the application by G. Genette, who stated in his “Structuralisme et Critique Littéraire” that the “mythopoetical activity” of these tools is such that “. . . The analysis of *bricolage* could ‘be applied almost word for word’ to criticism, and especially to ‘literary criticism’” (115). The tools which Owens the *bricoleur* brings to his text are autobiography, several Old World mythologies, and myth contained within the ethnographies of the Choctaw. Earlier in his essay Derrida states that “ethnology could have been born as a science only at the moment when a decentering had come about: at the moment when European culture. . . . had been *dislocated*, driven from its locus, and forced to stop considering itself the culture of reference” (112). More than one “culture of reference” has been carefully cobbled into *The Sharpest Sight*.

The Sharpest Sight is a novel created by a mixedblood writer who is equally at home with Native American and Euramerican literature and criticism. (Owens teaches English and creative writing at the University of New Mexico, and specializes in Native American literature.²) The complexity of this text raises many issues, including the question: is it still an Indian story if it uses Euramerican material? In “The Heuristic Powers of Indian Literatures” Kenneth Roemer asks “what constitutes an ‘Indian’ or ‘Native American’ author?” One answer, he says, is provided by Geary Hobson in the introduction to *The Remembered Earth*: “those of Native American blood and background who affirm their heritage in individual ways.” Remarking on a conference he attended where one professor refused to accept Momaday as an Indian because “he has a Ph.D.” (14), Roemer backlights the issue: what remains of the “Indianness” when the author has a formal Euramerican education? One premise of this article is that Owens’ use of autobiography is one tool for maintaining his cultural identity, through which he presents the experiences of “we” (his family) and not just “I” (the educated author), and who assembles materials from many different cultures to tell his story.

The Sharpest Sight takes a large step beyond many other modern American Indian texts because it does not examine only the usual terrain where the Native American meets the Euramerican Dream. Like many of the works by Chippewa writer Gerald Vizenor, Owens’ works are forward-looking, beyond the frequently used issues of poverty, alcoholism, and the victimization of Native peoples. Instead, myths, cultures, and

autobiography mix on a dynamic frontier in which no one voice dominates. Unwilling to simply offer up a work in which Choctaw spice flavors a complex, frequently humorous murder mystery, Owens appropriates and subverts the colonists' canonized literature. *The Sharpest Sight* has been carefully set off-center, making all readers stretch for complete understanding, placing all readers into the margin. To borrow a concept from Derrida, there is no privileged center in this novel.

The elements visible in *The Sharpest Sight* are held fast, like a piece of carefully crafted furniture, in which the intersecting joints are so meticulously dove-tailed that the seams blur and the glue has bonded stronger than the wood it holds. The intertextual nature of the novel allows members of disparate cultures, joined in the story, to observe and remark on the attitudes and values of the "the other." Owens demonstrates with this novel the creative power of the mixedblood described by Gerald Vizenor: "The mixedblood autobiographer is a word hunter in transitive memories, not an academic chauffeur in the right lane to opposition; those mixedbloods at the treelines . . . are wild word hunters with new metaphors. . ." ("Crows" 101). Vizenor's hunting analogy is doubly appropriate to Owens' text, in which the act of hunting is played out on many levels as his characters flush out answers about their identity. Cole and Hoey McCurtain learn an ongoing lesson about what being Choctaw means in their lives lived away from the Choctaw homeland.

Mundo Morales comprehends the strands of his California Mexican-American heritage which include "a Chinese gentleman from Canton" (230) and an enslaved Chumash ancestor, denied by generations of Spaniards who believe they are the pureblood authentic natives of California, choosing to overlook the obvious contradictions ("Motion" 92). Vizenor's oft-quoted remark that "mixedbloods loosen the seams in the shrouds of identities" (101) applies to *The Sharpest Sight* as Owens' transforms that shroud into a fatigue jacket emblazoned with a Vietnam era parody of a line from The Lord's Prayer (10). Ironically, Cole McCurtain wears the jacket as he searches for the bones of his brother, who throughout the book is a shadow in the valley of death.

The remainder of this essay will provide a look under that shroud of identity to the skeletal Choctaw and European mythologies beneath, particularly as they pertain to the characters of Attis and Diana, and will conclude with a discussion of attitudes Owens, the literary critic, has expressed concerning the position from which he writes his mixedblood fiction.

The body of Attis McCurtain is seen washing downstream in the flooding Salinas River by his old friend and fellow Vietnam vet Mundo

Morales. The sighting is presaged by Mundo's rainy vision of a large black panther, a Choctaw *koi*, in the middle of the bridge. It usually inhabits Mississippi and is identified as *nalusachito*, or "soul eater," a few pages later by Uncle Luther. This provides the first of several significant cultural intersections, most of which occur near rivers.

The first scene on the bridge also provides one of the novels' major themes: when does an individual believe what he knows, and what is the "truth?" Mundo doesn't know if he should believe his senses, choosing at first to attribute the vision to post-traumatic stress. For each character in this novel, knowledge and truth are determined by beliefs. Mundo learns to let the Indian in him believe in dreams and visions, but the ghost of his Catholic grandfather doesn't believe in the abilities of Choctaw witches so he does not detect Luther or Onatima as players in the story. Those who are open to the dynamic blending of cultures, to the examination of others' beliefs, provide insight for the reader and closure for themselves at novel's end. Characters in lock-step with a Eurocentric Christian "reality" that doesn't accept the validity of the beliefs of "others" have more to learn, as in the case of one white FBI agent who has a nervous breakdown after encountering Luther's reality in the swamp (168). This novel eventually releases its prisoners on their own recognizance. Their penance: they have to think.

One way for the reader to understand aspects of the Indian perspective in this novel is to go to ethnologies to gain insight into the Choctaw world view and mythology.³ Such will give added depth to the story; for example, in chapter three, Attis' ghost (one of two a Choctaw possesses, in this case, his *shilombish*) feels something "coming closer," an "ancient memory [which] had awakened, a stirring in his stilled blood" which dictates his destination. The river's nature changes, from the flooding Salinas River in California, to a persona complete with the "ceiling of heavy trees, and odors of decay" (8). Along the shore are the elderly and revered Choctaw bone pickers, whose cultural role is unique among American Indian tribes. The boiling river swarms with snakes, and then Attis, in a scene reminiscent of T. S. Eliot's Phlebas, drifts into a great whirlpool. A brief exchange occurs: "'*Chahta yakni*.' The words echoed as if he had spoken them. '*Chahta isht ia*,' a voice answered back" (9). At this point the informed reader understands Attis' reality has slipped from a California river to a Mississippi river, the Black Water River or *Oka lusa hacha* of Choctaw myth, where the spirit must cross into one of two worlds where the afterlife exists.⁴ The "good hunting ground" is where the temperature is mild, the terrain and plants are soft, and there is plenty of food, pleasure, and instant gratification. The "bad hunting ground" is a

desolate foggy wasteland with thorny plants and no warmth or clothing (Campbell 148). The Choctaw words are “Choctaw land?” and what amounts to “descended from Choctaw” or “Choctaw blood.”⁵ Meanwhile, the second ghost, or *shilup*, has, at great risk to his great-uncle, been called back to the Yazoo country cabin of Luther Cole, who is watching this story unfold through his dreams.

Attis had been incarcerated in the state mental hospital for the murder of his girlfriend, Jenna Nemi. Located outside the bitter town of Amarga, the hospital is situated in a bend of the Salinas River at the base of Pine Mountain. An orderly convinces Attis to escape through a hole in the fence by telling him his father and brother would help him escape to Mississippi. Upon stepping through the hole, Attis is shot and tumbles into the river (92–94). His uneasy *shilup* will not make the final journey to the afterworld until his body has been handled properly, according to ancient Choctaw custom.

Early European visitors to Choctaw villages were, at the very least, startled by the mortuary customs practiced by members of the Muskogean-speaking nation. Choctaw did not bury or burn their dead, but instead placed a scaffold atop oak supports some yards from the deceased’s house, where the body was placed, wrapped in a blanket or bark to keep birds and animals away, and left for several months until the flesh decayed to such a point that it could be removed easily from the bones. According to historian H. B. Cushman:

After the body had remained upon the scaffold a sufficient time for the flesh to have nearly or entirely decayed, the hattak fullih nipi foni (bone picker) the principal official in their funeral ceremonies and especially appointed for that duty . . . began his awful duty of picking off the flesh that still adhered to the bones . . . The bone picker never trimmed the nails of his thumbs, index and middle fingers which accordingly grew to an astonishing length . . . After he had picked all the flesh from the bones, he then tied it up in a bundle and carefully laid it upon a corner of the scaffold; then gathering up the bones in his arms he descended and placed them in a previously prepared box, and then applied fire to the scaffold. . . . (165–66)

Readers will note that Uncle Luther has read Cushman’s book and comments on the veracity of his ethnographic descriptions in an ironic bit of intertextual humor (87).

This care of the bones is tied in with a Choctaw creation story of the tribe’s movement from the west to the site of Nanih Waiya, a sacred mound, in the present state of Mississippi. According to a detailed account

reported by Dr. Gideon Lincecum included in a text by John Swanton, the Choctaws migrated from the west for 43 years, following a leader who placed a pole in the ground each night, and each morning it would be leaning to the southeast. This pointed the direction the group should travel, until they eventually settled at the place where the pole remained upright and tamped itself further into the ground. The entire trip was made by travelers who were transporting the bones of ancestors as well as any relatives who died during the journey, making several trips back and forth each day to move them all. Upon settling at Nanih Waiya, the bones were reverently placed in a pile over which an earthen mound was constructed (18). As Luther Cole tells Cole McCurtain, after describing that ancestral journey, "A Choctaw's bones must not be lost" (98).

Since *The Sharpest Sight* abounds with ethnographic material, the category of "Native American novel" is a logical first choice for reviewers. Despite the major emphasis placed on magical realism and ethnographic materials in the novel, however, Owens allows no one culture to dominate. His characters are free to comment on the ethnographic materials used to construct the text. Mundo's Mexican American community is examined, as is Jessard's nihilistic interpretation of Euramerican cultural thought, and Luther's approach to the outside world, balanced between dreams and reading books. Luther states, regarding fiction and ethnographies about Native Americans by whites, "we got to be aware of the stories they're making about us, and the way they change the stories we already know" (91).

A close reading of *The Sharpest Sight* brings a wealth of ethnographic details to the reader, enhancing the mystery and the richness of the story. To keep readers from complacency, Owens has the characters themselves question the text. As Onatima explains to Cole about the *shilombish* and *shilup*, letting him understand that the shadow lingering in the corner of Luther's cabin is one of Attis' ghosts, Luther goads her: "I wonder if Onatima ain't got those words backwards. It's a tricky language" (111). To be sure, the reader will have to do his own research, because Owens doesn't say if she has it right or not.

The substantial subtext regarding two central figures, Attis McCurtain and Diana Nemi, was not mentioned in any of the reviews of *The Sharpest Sight*, and the narrative does support a non-mythological reading, as demonstrated by all previous reviews. However, in these two characters the reader may find much of the poetry of the novel, much of the mythopoetic play. The alter ego of Attis McCurtain is closely linked with Adonis, a pre-Christian fertility god. Diana Nemi is also Diana of Nemi, the Roman huntress and goddess of the forest and fertility, very powerful

in her own right, but also manipulated by powerful men. Here, Owens licenses the reader to find additional meanings, especially if the reader brings the understanding of the alter egos of these two particular characters to the novel.⁶

In a text with no privileged center, there is no limit to the play in the structure, to appropriate another concept from Derrida who postulates that “the center had no natural site, that it was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play.” (110). The movement or play of Attis and Diana from mythic characters to modern fictional protagonists is discretionary vacillation on the part of the reader. For example, several times throughout the novel an owl or *ishkitini* soars over the river or calls without an answer. The reader may read it as an owl or as a spirit (Attis or Jenna) or as a familiar (to Luther or Diana). When Attis dies at the base of Pine Mountain, is this the Choctaw warrior or the fertility god dying? And when Hoey kills Jessard, is he protecting Mundo, or is he a warrior entering into the long line of priests, this one with a Choctaw agenda, to protect the goddess Diana? They can be any or all, flashing back and forth between alternating views like literary holograms. Each reader, armed with the mythology of Attis and Diana, must decide which reading best supports their understanding of the outcome of the story. As Uncle Luther says to Onatima, “You read too much, old lady. Reading all them books makes you think everything’s supposed to always come out the same because the writing never changes” (215). For the Native reader, the story goes full circle, as many American Indian stories do, from a river to a river, and concludes: “In four days they were at the river, where an old man and old woman were waiting to take them home” (263). “Them” includes Hoey, Cole, and the bones of Attis, returned for a Choctaw burial, and mirroring four days’ travel to the afterworld. A trip successfully completed by all.

Owens turns the tables on those expecting just Choctaw myths by picking up European myths and syncretically weaving them into his American Indian story. Though there are many subtle textual indications to verify that Attis and Diana are indeed hybrid mythic figures, there are no overt clues as with the Choctaw culture, which is discussed throughout the novel in dialog between characters. Like pictures which can be seen only if the viewer knows how to focus and unfocus his or her eyes to achieve the necessary depth of field, Attis and Diana are hidden in plain sight in the text, the sign/signified slipping around and many readers missing it entirely.

Attis McCurtain is a mixedblood who, as happened with many Indians in Vietnam, was placed as point man on patrol, based on the time-

worn myth that Indians can walk silently and see in the dark. What Attis saw he described in a letter to his brother Cole, in which he spoke of “walking shadows and jungles that had three levels,” warning Cole “Don’t let these motherfuckers get you, too” (10). With this letter he sent a jacket, worn by Cole throughout the story. Attis, the murder victim, is the mentally disturbed vet, who, upon returning home after his tour of duty, murders his girlfriend, Jenna Nemi, in a confused stress-induced rage. The book opens at the very point in time of Attis’ death at the hospital near Pine Mountain, when his friend Mundo Morales, local sheriff, is patrolling the countryside around the flooding Salinas River. Owens’ word-play is subtle as Mundo remembers or visualizes Attis many times throughout the text, as when he thinks of a camping and fishing trip:

By day they’d drift nymphs or worms into the pools under cutbanks to catch eight- or ten-inch browns. At night the *pine* needles and *oak* leaves would rustle with the hooves of wild *pigs* that nosed around the camp, and they’d lie under blankets trying to name the stars and talking of girls they knew. Attis had known a few *Indian stories*, and those would become *tangled* with *other stories* and *mythic tales* of Amarga cheerleaders. (40, emphasis mine)

In *The Sharpest Sight*, his Indian stories become tangled with those from Asia Minor. Encapsulated in this memory is the gist of Attis’ story, but Mundo doesn’t know what he is seeing in his memories yet.

Attis the Phrygian fertility god was associated with Cybele in western Asia. Labeled a god of vegetation like Adonis, his birth is accounted to have been miraculous. Sir James Frazer in *The Golden Bough* claims “Two different accounts of his death were current. According to one he was killed by a boar, like Adonis. According to the other he unmanned himself under a pine-tree, and bled to death on the spot . . . After his death Attis is said to have been changed into a pine tree” (403-04). An annual spring ritual celebrating the birth, death and resurrection of Attis entailed cutting a pine tree, which was “brought into the sanctuary of Cybele, where it was treated as a great divinity . . . and the effigy of a young man, doubtless Attis himself, was tied to the middle of the stem” (405). Many variants of this story exist, including accounts of the young priests who practiced self-mutilation by castrating themselves as part of a bloody ritual, which may have been considered “instrumental in recalling Attis to life and hastening the general resurrection of nature” (406). Frazer speculates a few pages later that “in old days” the priest who played the part of Attis in the festival was “regularly hanged or otherwise slain upon the sacred tree” (412). The practice changed to using the effigy. “After

being fastened to the tree, the effigy was kept for a year and then burned . . . The original intention of such customs was no doubt to maintain the spirit of vegetation in life throughout the year" (409).

Frazer's theories are seconded by Jessie Weston, who in her book *From Ritual to Romance* (which influenced such modern writers as poet T. S. Eliot and novelist John Steinbeck, another of Owens' critical specialties), demonstrates that the origins of the Grail Romance and the Holy Grail stem not from Christianity, but from rites related to the vegetation gods Attis and Adonis. The role of the Fisher King is of particular importance in *The Sharpest Sight*, which contains many images of wastelands, whether laid waste by too little or too much water. However, *The Sharpest Sight* is not an American Indian version of the Grail Romance. In his reading of Silko's *Ceremony* in *Four American Indian Literary Masters*, Alan Velie draws the distinction that the story he envisioned Silko telling concentrates on the wasteland and ignores the grail (108). This theory, however, colonizes Native American stories by ignoring the large number of legends found worldwide which have parallels to the grail romance sans grail. The concept that the health of the land and the health of humans are tied together is found throughout Native American mythology and is not original to Europe, where the grail story may have first sprouted. Owens appropriates the stories of the Fisher King and the return of the waters, but these are only two of many literary threads running through the novel. The health of the king is tied to the health of the land, and when the king is wounded in the groin, the fertility of the land suffers, so he must either be cured or must die so a new king can take his place and restore the land (114). Attis has died, but the health or destination of his *shilombish* and *shilup* are still in question, and are important to the Choctaw portion of this story. Once the bones are found this is resolved, and the restoration of the Salinas River represented in chapter 53 can begin.

Owens turns the grail romance on its head by giving the land too much water, rather than too little, caused by an "angry" dammed up river (26). Attis, the mixedblood who was unable to "keep himself free of the worst evil by thinking in the oldest ways" (214), is dead, washed away in the flooding Salinas river to lodge on a natural brushy platform in the arms of several small oak trees, the Choctaw wood of choice in burial platforms (and sublimely mirroring the god Attis on his pine tree), where his flesh rots until his brother finds him. The cycle is incomplete, by Choctaw reckoning, until the bones are prepared and Attis' spirit has traveled to the proper destination for the afterlife. While his brother Cole, his natural successor, is evading the draft and honing his Choctaw

thinking with Luther and Onatima and Hoey, the river is still unsettled and Attis' ghosts wait, soaring over the countryside as a Choctaw owl and lurking in a Mississippi cabin. As Cole learns what his Choctaw relatives expect, he gains strength and transforms to fill his role, but the protagonists begin working at cross purposes. Mundo wants to find the body to prove Dan Nemi is the murderer, but Cole wants to find the body to lay the bones to rest, understanding that Attis' death was the result of the murder Attis committed earlier and that a balance of sorts has been reached. "By the way, you ought to trim those fingernails," Mundo tells Cole while they shoot some hoops, reminding readers of one feature of Choctaw bone pickers. As long-haired Cole prepares to deal with his brother's bones, he meets a major diversion in the form of Diana Nemi who, with an agenda of her own, needs to influence the men who would serve Attis.

Diana Nemi is viewed by some critics as a flirt or a whore, or at the very least a vehicle for gratuitous sex. However, this woman is the most subtly drawn and possibly most complex of all of Owens' characters and her various personae are so widely spread throughout the story that she has been consistently misunderstood in the reviews. Luther recognizes her as injured, but the *viejo*, Mundo's deceased grandfather's ghost, would label her a witch. Though Luther seems to be orchestrating events through his dream visions, outside interference from the Catholic Spanish ghost is affecting the story, and Diana, who initiates much of the story, is caught between her alter ego's instincts as a force of nature and the manipulative priests who would be her "King of the Wood" (Frazer 9).

Diana of Nemi is one of the most ancient and powerful of the Roman goddesses, according to Frazer, who examined her origins and variants exhaustively in *The Golden Bough*. Her primary temple was in an oak grove (where the "golden bough" originates) at a lake called "Diana's Mirror" at Nemi. A goddess of fertility, motherhood, "of the woodlands and of wild creatures," her temple housed a perpetually burning fire tended by Vestal virgins. Additionally, according to Frazer,

Diana of the Wood . . . had a male companion Virbius by name, who was to her what Adonis was to Venus, or Attis to Cybele; and . . . that this mystical Virbius was represented in historical times by a line of priests known as Kings of the Wood, who regularly perished by the swords of their successors, and whose lives were in a manner bound up with a certain tree in the grove, because so long as that tree was uninjured they were safe from attack. (9-10)

A brief overview of Frazer's text regarding Diana's "priests" indicates that Diana was actually a tool in the hands of these priests, in whose name

they ruled and deposed each other through combat. Though Hearn saw Diana as shallow and “a whore” (28) and Jaskoski remarked on the possibility of feminist objections to Owens’ use of “attacks on women as a central plotting device” (1546), this character actually mirrors the mythical experiences of Diana of Nemi. Emanating an innate sexuality, which for Diana Nemi is one of her few forms of power, the mortal, modern woman also finds herself a tool in the hands of “priests”: first her father and then the nihilistic Jessard Deal (a modern cross between Ahab and Moby Dick and more ominous than the evil gambler in Vizenor’s *Bearheart*). Owens implies sexual abuse by the father (shown in her hatred of him on 238) and overtly demonstrates Deal’s sexual use/abuse of Diana (also 238). The outcome for the mortal Diana shifts in this text as shaman-in-training Hoey breaks the bough and gives it a Choctaw twist; his mythology or world view doesn’t require him to control the Roman goddess for his power. Hoey, as the last priest by default, grants her forgiveness and freedom.

The archetypal Diana, according to Gillisann Haroian-Guerin, “assumed to herself the powers of action and apocalypse that had traditionally been assigned to male protagonists.” As she appears in modern fiction, she “functions in many cases not as a heroine but as a hero.” Diana in *The Sharpest Sight* does not “displace” (1787) the protagonists, but it can be argued that the range of her actions and shapes cast her as a heroic figure. In his confusion over Attis’ death or disappearance, Mundo attributes many of the story’s events to Dan Nemi, not Diana, perhaps overlooking her behavior due to her age and gender. Jessard, however, the second combatant for the “King of the Woods” title, knows her “potential . . . is unlimited” (235).

The woman Diana Nemi in *The Sharpest Sight* views the world through the experiences of how her father treats her mother and how she perceives all men treat all women. Her father’s many affairs, and his possible abuse of Diana herself, have turned her mother into a woman unable to comfort Diana, stricken after the murder of Diana’s sister Jenna. Diana’s actions take the reader through a variety of possible motivating forces. This character’s frank sexuality leads to Mundo’s view that “[t]here had always been something about the Nemi women; they radiated it, a kind of dangerous-feeling sex. Smart sex, he thought” (78). It led reviewer Hearn to remark: “Diana Nemi is someone we know too well. Her sexuality is connected with sorcery and evil; therefore, she must be punished before she can be forgiven” (28). This reading overlooks the many masks Diana wears; she could be said to represent here Nature in conflict with the mechanized Western world that supplanted her. She isn’t

evil, or a witch, though the interpretation of the viejo that she is a *bruja* reflects the role the church thrust onto the goddess, eventually mutating her into a witch, to move her out of the way of Christianity.⁷

According to Frazer, as fertility goddess “it behooved Diana to have a male partner” (163), who in *The Sharpest Sight* is apparently her subtly incestuous father, Dan Nemi. Frazer notes that “we may infer that the sacred marriage of the powers both of vegetation and of water has been celebrated by many peoples for the sake of promoting fertility of the earth . . . and that in such rites the part of the divine bridegroom or bride is often sustained by a man or woman” (169). If Diana Nemi is that woman, she hates being used in such a fashion, and hates her father in particular, as shown in the rape scene when she “. . . hated Dan Nemi with all of her soul” (238).

Anger aside, it could be argued that the woman/goddess Diana possesses several trickster characteristics, depending on how the reader interprets her role in the book, but she doesn’t overtly play a prominent role of trickster. Her interactions with Attis, Mundo, Cole and Hoey frequently take place at or near the river, which represents in this book “a liminal space where cultural boundaries are breachable,” similar to those riparian spaces used by Silko and Erdrich for female tricksters, according to Babcock and Cox (103). She also uses more than a few of the masks and mirrors that Vizenor’s tricksters favor.

Masks are associated with Diana, as in Chapter 37, when the possibility of shape-shifting is hinted (197–98). This chapter presents the heart and the conflict of mortal/immortal Diana. *Nalusachito*, the “soul eater,” would seem to be one of the woodland animals “owned” and used by or a persona of Diana, who was so angered at her sister’s murder that she wants revenge. Diana, goddess by the pool, or her familiar, *nalusachito*, is as at home in the swamps of Mississippi trying to devour the soul of Attis as she is by the Salinas River. As she stalks the *shilup* in the swamp, the two, Attis and *nalusachito*, mingle in Cole’s dreams, revealing the torments of great fear and great family love. “The black cat sprang effortlessly behind him, while the mud sucked his feet deep into the swamp and threw up vines to trip and hold him. The panther cried like a woman in pain, and Cole heard himself crying also. He wanted to turn and comfort the beast, but when he turned it was Attis who stood there with arms reaching toward him” (77). This reader sees the author offering unconditional love to his tormented, absent brother, regardless of the crimes or memories which haunt him, in addition to the imagery of the comingled pain of characters Attis and Diana.

By conducting a Choctaw sweat bath ceremony⁸ after Diana is raped,

shaman Hoey directs Diana to “let go of the things that prevent you from breathing” (242), ameliorating much of her anger and removing the panther as a menace to Attis’ *shilup*. As Hoey and Mundo learn to see the story as Luther intends, they confront what may be the last of Diana’s looking-glasses, in Jessard’s bar, where the surreal canoeist travels through the land of sky blue waters. Throughout the novel many events or characters are seen via reflections in mirrors, such as the final shootout between Mundo and Jessard in the bar. Understanding and relieving much of Diana’s anger allows Hoey to see clearly past the reflection in the mirror. His sharp sight in the Tiptoe Inn saves Mundo’s life, after Mundo fires at the perceived threat in the reflection, not the actual threat elsewhere in the room.

The commentaries of Frazer and Weston bring into focus many parallels between the myth of Attis and the myth of Diana and the Choctaw myth and culture within the actions of the story. Many pages could be spent detailing them. Contradictions also exist and Owens leaves it to the reader to decide which features to accept and which to ignore. For example, Diana Nemi’s actions, especially regarding her seduction of Cole and her intrusion into Mundo’s thoughts even as he makes love to his wife, can be interpreted as this character’s attempt to lure Cole and Mundo away from their search for Attis and his killer, but the results may be seen to backfire. Diana’s contrary actions can be drawn out with the aid of Weston’s text under the chapter “The Freeing of the Waters.” If Diana, wanting to deter or distract Cole, is acting the role of the temptress, as does the King’s daughter when trying to lure a chaste young man into a sexual relationship to free the waters and return fertility to the land, then Diana has indeed distracted the virgin Cole from his task. Diana weakens him by stealing his seed and his medicine pouch, but unintentionally hastens the restoration of the land (Weston 30-31). Cole draws on what he has learned from Luther and is still able to find the body and restore the bones to the Choctaw homeland. The Salinas River/Wasteland denouement in Chapter 53 shows the return of the water to its channel and begins the resolution of the story. “In the hot summer, the Salinas was an underground river once again, a current of such purity and beauty that it could not be seen or touched” (260). This is, after all, a hybrid novel, so the purist looking for a chaste Gawain to find Attis’ bones as grail or restore the water is out of luck. Times change, cultures mingle, and the earth is restored. This is only one possible reading of Diana’s role, and, as Luther says of Onatima’s thumbnail sketch of Choctaw lore, one which may have it backwards, but the waters are nevertheless restored. Derrida would approve of this outcome, which removes the opposition between

nature and culture. Owens' use of *bricolage* allowed him to write this story using the tools of all the cultures which met on or near the bridge over the Salinas River.

Many large questions regarding the text and the characters within *The Sharpest Sight* remain unanswered in Owens' text and in this article. His style of writing intentionally leaves the reader to ponder aspects of the outcome. One major premise of the novel is that humans must live in harmony with the natural world. In the present day some cultures, such as that of mainstream Euramericans, have entrenched world views that put them in opposition to the natural world, while others, in the margins, still have an idea that nature is not the enemy, to be conquered.

Whether nurturing nature or solving mysteries, the agenda Owens has written for the characters within his fiction steers clear of some other popular Native American fiction which, he observes, is populated by "exotic and cuddly Indians" ("Return" 339), as well as the

Euramerican invention called the Vanishing American: Indians who inhabit dysfunctional and vaguely defined tribal communities, drink themselves to death, abuse self and other within a matrix of dark humor, and save the colonizer the trouble of genocide. In such writing it is clear that Euramericans don't have to shoot or hang Indians because the Indians are quite willing to do the job themselves and provide some colorful entertainment for white readers along the way. This is literary tourism. ("Blood Trails" 18)

Identity, not the commercially-popular portrayal of self destruction, is at the heart of *The Sharpest Sight*. "What is an Indian?" Owens asks in his 1992 critical study *Other Destinies: Understanding the American Indian Novel*. "The fact that so many people throughout the world have a strangely concrete sense of what a 'real' Indian should be adds still greater stress to the puzzle" (5). Owens, as autobiographer exploring his identity, writes within a zone that he has defined as a "frontier" which "carries with it the burden of colonial discourse" and this frontier "is always unstable, multidirectional, hybridized, characterized by heteroglossia" ("Song" 58-59). Owens uses the term colonial, not postcolonial, to emphasize that "American Indians remain colonized peoples. The colonizers never went home; they simply changed their names to 'Americans.'" In a concurrent literary colonization "the native is made over in this fiction to reflect the psychic cravings of the colonialist," bearing little resemblance to those who identify as Native Americans (*Destinies* 23-24). Hence Uncle Luther's interest in the stories told about Indians (*Sight* 91) and the difficulty Hoey encounters when reading books about Indians "and trying to figure out how to act and think" (56). As

Gish notes, "To read Owens, then, is to also be reading, at least thinking about, what Owens himself—as person and as artist/critic—thinks about: American Indians and American Indian fiction" (433).

Early reviewers looked at *The Sharpest Sight* as primarily a work of Native American fiction, but given the extent of Euramerican material it contains, it blossoms into a story in which the sum is greater than all of its individual parts. It is "part of dynamic intertextual and cross-cultural dialogues" identified by Roemer: "Pretend that Native American literatures are not ignored or peripherally situated on the margins of the American literary canon, but instead are placed right at the center of literary surveys and critical debates. What types of questions would the Native texts generate?" (9).

That depends on the kind of texts the readers see. Given the syncretic nature of the text of *The Sharpest Sight* they will see all the elements necessary to a good storyteller: life, death, drama, ethics, love, laughter, and healing. For Owens, the result is not a postmodern fragmented reality for his protagonists and his own dislocated family, but "the possibility of recovering a centered sense of personal identity and significance" (*Destinies* 19).

For Dad, John M. Dwyer, 1921–1997

NOTES

¹Reviews by Jennifer Howard of the *Washington Post* and Gary Paulsen of the *Los Angeles Times* showed that these reviewers read the book but missed details, such as the Indian tribe (naming Chickasaw for Choctaw) and the state (Arkansas instead of Mississippi) where Luther lives. These reviews glossed over everything but the most basic mystery of the novel.

²Gerald Vizenor, introduction to "Motion of Fire and Form," by Louis Owens; *Native American Literature*, ed. Gerald Vizenor (New York: Harper-Collins, 1995), 83.

³Of particular help when researching the Choctaw materials in this paper was Clara Sue Kidwell's and Charles Roberts' *The Choctaws: A Critical Bibliography*.

⁴The Choctaw afterworld is reached by the spirit after traveling on a path eastward toward the good hunting grounds, according to Thomas Campbell in his excellent overview of Choctaw eschatology "The Choctaw Afterworld." The path crosses a "tremendous cataract," at which the *shilup* must cross a slippery log while being pelted with rocks by beings from the far end. Those individuals who have not committed any of the "great crimes that merit banishment" cross easily;

those who have murdered another Choctaw, are guilty of gossip, or who have set aside a pregnant wife, are destined to fall off the log into the cataract. Says Campbell: "...the Choctaw type of afterworld resembles the Greek Elysium and Hades more than it resembles the Christian heaven and hell" (153).

⁵These and subsequent definitions of Choctaw words which appear in quotes come from Byington's *Dictionary of the Choctaw Language*.

⁶Owens confirmed the mythological alter egos of Attis McCurtain and Diana Nemi during an informal conversation in November 1995, the same conversation documented in "Louis Owens," *Contemporary Authors: Autobiography Series*, vol. 24, 1996, 297.

⁷A brief commentary by Barbara Walker in *The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets* discusses the ouster of the pagan Diana cult by early Christians as their major rival.

⁸Sweat lodges and ceremonies have long been associated with Choctaw healing practices, according to Swanton in *Source Material for the Social and Ceremonial Life of the Choctaw Indians* (230-31).

⁹This remark is one of several Owens made extemporaneously during his 28 February 1997 lecture "Blood Trails: Missing Grandmothers and Mixing Messages."

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Nightland and the Mythic West

Linda Lizut Helstern

The American West has always been Indian country—even, or perhaps especially, the Old West of the genre Western that fixed Indians in the popular imagination as the enemies of both progress and those valiant white settlers armed with law, culture, and civilization. This is the image against which contemporary Indian identity has been configured. However, this change in terminology effects a cultural transformation when Louis Owens interrogates the American national myth and the associated race and gender stereotypes in his most recent novel *Nightland*. Confidently appropriating the conventions of the genre Western and juxtaposing them against elements of Cherokee and Pueblo myth and ritual, Owens reconfigures the mythic West of cowboys, Indians, and frontier justice as post-contact Indian country inhabited by a cultural mix of Anglos, mixedbloods, fullbloods, animals, and ghosts. *Nightland* is the Cherokee ritual term for West, home of the Thunders and home of the dead (Hail 4–6; Ugyweyuhí 102–03). Here Indians are not only cowboys, they are distinct individuals with differing perspectives on tribal affiliation and traditions.

Owens' New West, where antelope graze among the twenty-seven dishes of the Very Large Array, is a place where two mixedblood deer hunters find a big buck turned into big bucks, the Great Thunder of the Cherokees, still wielding his ultimate weapon, lightning. In an environment simultaneously secular and spiritual, where Anglos are distinctly marginalized, Indian anger and Indian greed, part of the West's postcolonial legacy, meet and clash with traditional Indian values. The ultimate moral force in this novel is not the law but traditional Cherokee

wisdom, often dispensed by a storyteller named Siquani, whose age can only be guessed. According to Billy Keene, his mixedblood grandson, he's three or four hundred years old.

The issue of Indian identity in *Nightland* is no less complicated than the moral issue on which this tale is hung. Ultimately, the novel suggests that the very idea of a singular, stable identity upon which the formula Western depended is a fiction. The mixedblood hunters Billy Keene and Will Striker are simultaneously heroes and thieves, Indians and settlers, or at least the sons of settlers. Their Cherokee fathers and white mothers had come west from Sequoyah County, Oklahoma, during the Dust Bowl migration, bringing with them "Grampa" Siquani, whose traditional talents included water witching. Even as Indians, this younger mixed-blood generation cannot claim to be Native. Their alien status is abundantly clear to Will, who notes, "Compared to the Indians of New Mexico, Cherokees might as well be Norwegians. That's how a lot of other Indians thought of Cherokees anyway" (31). The pattern of Cherokee life in the United States, indeed, bears remarkable similarity to the westering pattern of white Americans. While the Cherokees' forced evacuation from their traditional North Carolina/Tennessee homelands is generally known, it should be remembered that the first tribal moves west, to Missouri, then to Arkansas and on to Texas, were voluntary (Hail 1-3). Inasmuch as the Chisholm Trail, the route of the first successful cattle drives, was pioneered by the mixedblood Cherokee trader Jesse Chisholm, it might even be suggested that the ultimate symbol of the West, the cowboy, owes its existence to the Cherokees.

Siquani holds the hard journey over the Trail of Tears in his personal memory. It was a journey that in 1839 resettled a culture that included wealthy, literate southern plantation owners in alien Indian Territory across the Mississippi. Even when he moved on to New Mexico, Siquani never left behind in time or place his traditional Cherokee values, his pragmatism, or his sense of humor: he knows the old stories and brings them to bear whenever the occasion calls for it. Even his name speaks stories. It contains echoes of Sequoyah, sometimes transliterated Sikwayi, whose invention of the Cherokee syllabary moved his people from the oral tradition to literacy in a phenomenally short space of time (Smith, Interview; Mooney 531, 219-20). Sequoyah may be the ultimate mixedblood role model for the contemporary mixedblood writer, but Siquani more specifically echoes the name of a contemporary Cherokee storyteller (Owens, Interview). His stories were among those collected by Jack and Anna Kilpatrick in *Friends of the Thunder*, where his name is variably spelled *Siquanid*.¹ One of these is the story of a lucky fisherman

who saw the famed outlaw Cherokee Bill disappear before his eyes and found and hid the fortune in stolen gold that Bill left behind. The old fisherman never used the money, and though he wanted his sons to have it, they were never able to find the hiding place he revealed to them on his death bed (176–79). Billy Keene and Will Striker see themselves, first and foremost, as fishermen, and the plot of Siquanid's story bears memorable similarities to Owens', right down to the disappearing cash.

Nightland gains moral depth through another of Siquanid's stories, the story of "Thunder and the Uk'ten." The Kilpatricks call this story about the choice between good and evil "one of the greatest of all American Indian myths" and note that it "has never before been committed to paper" (*Friends* 51). It is the story of two boys who find a hungry snake while they are out hunting and keep themselves busy feeding it. The snake eventually grows to an enormous size and develops horns. One day, hearing trouble, the boys find the snake coiled around Thunder, who is fighting for his life. They must decide quickly whose side they will take; both opponents appeal to their friendship. The boys ultimately support Thunder, who has reminded them, "I always help you." After they shoot the snake, Thunder, indeed, continues to help them, teaching them how to escape the snake's fumes that yet have the power to destroy them (53–56). This is a story of the power of reciprocal responsibility. As Thunder tells the boys, "While we live on earth, or until the world ends, we must protect and help each other" (Kilpatrick and Kilpatrick, *Friends* 55). Because of these two boys, Thunder has remained the guardian of the Cherokee people, who speak of him always "with the deepest tenderness and reverence" (Kilpatrick and Kilpatrick, *Friends* 51).

Billy Keene and his virtual brother Will Striker have been listening to Siquani's stories all their lives. Now in their mid-forties and soon old enough to be considered elders in their own right, the two men have always held very different attitudes toward them, attitudes that reflect their differing personal feelings about their Indian identity. Will has heard Siquani's stories and his father's with great respect and passed their lessons on to his own children: they are responsible for the very ropes that hold the earth in place, he reminds Holly and Si at the conclusion of the creation story (49). Will has also been taught to respect the classics of English and American literature, his white mother's stories, though his mother herself had always seemed to Will "a permanent visitor in the Indian world of her own home" (24). But these stories came later, and Will always heard them against the landscape of Siquani's stories, that "Cherokee world in which earth and sky were densely inhabited and one need only recall the right story to know how to act" (24). For the young

Will, "Dover Beach" became but a variant of Siquani's stories of the darkening land. One white story, however, could not be told in the Striker home: *The Last of the Mohicans*, the premiere story of the vanishing Indian race and the prototype, according to Henry Nash Smith, of the genre Western.² Will's father burned this book in anger before he had half finished it. In contrast, Billy finds Siquani's stories irrelevant in the modern world, the white world where he has somewhat more experience than Will. From childhood, he had felt that as a mixedblood he could choose his own identity; even as a contestant in Indian rodeos, Billy never felt Indian (111).

Given his respect for the moral power of stories, it is not surprising that Will Striker should hearken back to Siquani's wisdom when he and Billy find themselves in the Cibola National Forest with a suitcase full of money that doesn't belong to them. While Billy, the New Morality man, insists that the money is "a gift from the Great Spirit," Will counters flatly, "It's corpse money. Money a man got a tree through his guts for. We both know where money like this comes from" (5-6). While Billy makes a case for keeping the money no one knows they have, arguing that they can use it to take care of their land, their livelihood, Will continues to make associations between their current dilemma and old Cherokee stories: not only had Billy seen a body fall out of the sky from the west, it looked like a buzzard. If Will ultimately goes along with Billy's version of the story, it isn't until after the two men have foiled their armed pursuers to make a successful getaway. Even as they nurture their snake, Will, knowing both the Cherokee and the white stories, acknowledges his role in perpetrating evil. Tying his pocket handkerchief over his nose and mouth, he becomes an Old West, two-gun outlaw, a man who looks, in Billy's words, like he "just stole a million dollars" (14). What Billy has forgotten is that, according to the white storyline, outlaws must die in the end.

Billy's very name places him in the lineage of the most famous of all the Western outlaws, Indian and white. Siquani could suggest an alternative to the scenario of violent death lived out by Billy the Kid and Billy Pigeon alike, if only Billy Keene would listen. Since childhood, his life and Will's have been inscribed in the Cherokee myth of the Thunder Boys, the sons of the Great Thunder who live with him in the Nightland. Even their given names, like *Tso:suwa* and *So:suwa*, are but variants of one another. The morning after their fateful hunting trip, Siquani reminds Billy that his father used to account for his trouble-making penchant by saying he was the wild boy his mama found in the water (41). Like the mythic wild boy, Billy was always the leader his virtual brother followed

(Ugvweyuki 17).

If Billy forgets his Thunder Boy identity and the story told both by his father and Siquani, it isn't for want of biographical similarity. Billy himself remembers the time when he and Will peered through the boards of the corn shed, watching Billy's mother performing a ritual of some sort. Billy immediately concludes that she is practicing witchcraft, the same conclusion the wild boy drew under similar circumstances when his mother Selu was simply bringing forth corn from her own body, as she did before every meal (111; Kilpatrick and Kilpatrick, *Friends* 129). However, Will, with the tenacity suggested by his name, holds to his Cherokee identity and his mythic Thunder Boy identity, tending his meagre patch of corn through the August drought and respecting the old stories. The Thunder Boys were taught to plant corn by Selu, and Cal Striker had told his son that Cherokee people always plant corn because "Corn is our mother" (101).

With that explanation, Will's father concludes his story of Selu's creation. She was brought forth as a companion to Kanati, the lone man on earth. What Cal Striker's abbreviated version of the story does not reveal, however, is the reason for Selu's creation. Kanati was bored and, in his boredom, was killing too many animals. This angered the other animals, who complained to the creator. Human sexuality, it would seem, came into the world to restore harmony and ecological balance. If Billy and Will, like the cowboy heroes of the genre Western, seem destined to lead lives without women, it is not for want of advice from Siquani, who counsels marriage for Billy and marital reconciliation for Will. Knowing Will's heart better than he himself does, Siquani goes so far as to suggest a bit of traditional Cherokee love medicine to secure the return of his straying wife: Siquani's spell promises that a beloved White Woman, lonely in her soul, will find every other man an old crow compared with her sparrow hawk husband (47–48; Kilpatrick and Kilpatrick, *Run* 75–76). Siquani explicitly reminds Will of the moral grounding of his advice with a brief allusion to Kanati's story: "A man by himself gets into trouble, like old Kanati," he notes (48). For those who know the story, Siquani's brief allusion speaks volumes, especially when his reminder is followed immediately by a question about whether Will is growing corn in his garden this year.

This story holds special significance for Siquani. In the contemporary version of the Thunder Boys' story, Siquani stands as Kanati, the Great Thunder by another name. He himself makes the connection explicit, confiding to the ghost of Arturo Cruz that when Billy is gone and he is by himself for a long time, he feels like Kanati "all alone on the earth, before

First Woman come" (156). That Kanati is but another name for First Man sheds important light on the repeated theme of Siquani's stories, Cherokee death and Cherokee survival. His extended conversation with Billy early in the novel, which begins with advice on Billy's sex life, eventually brings Siquani to stories of the winter deaths on the Trail of Tears and the disappearance of traditional Cherokees who refused, some fifty years later, to be recorded on the Dawes rolls, the U.S. government's official list of "real Indians" (42; Smith, Interview). These stories are told in the briefest possible form, which is enough for anyone who knows them.

The logic of Siquani's fragmentary thoughts eludes Billy. He does not even recognize the story of the Trail of Tears. As the conversation continues, however, Billy recognizes an urgency in Siquani's tone that he has never heard before. Siquani adds the missing continuity when he tells the story of the Trail of Tears, not once but twice, to the ghost Arturo, a Pueblo Indian who could not be expected to know Cherokee history. Siquani admits to Arturo that he moved this far west only "for the story to be complete" (92). Knowing that his lineage will come to an end, Siquani, nonetheless, accepts from Awa Usdi the responsibility for remembering everything, assured that a day would come when "Indians and the deer, too, would be strong again" (157). Siquani mourns not only for those who have died but for those like his grandson Billy who "don't remember where they come from or how to talk right," who have stopped listening to the stories (92).

Indeed, Billy cuts off his only extended conversation with Grampa Siquani when he ceases to understand its drift. Of all the Cherokee stories he has just heard, stories of himself as the wild Thunder Boy, of Awa Usdi, of Nightland, the Trail of Tears, and the impact of the allotment act, the only thing that seems to register with Billy is a veiled threat to his white identity. Siquani gets the message. He knows his grandson. In one final story, he invokes a vision of half-breed identity pasted together from the fixed racial stereotypes of traditional American literature. "'If you was lucky,'" Siquani teases the confused Billy,

"[your] bottom half would be Indian because us Indians is the best lovers. That's why all those white women was always sneaking into our towns, and then when they got caught they'd pretend that they was kidnapped. If you was unlucky, it'd be the top half, because then you'd always be thinking about how Indians got everything stolen. If you was white on top and Indian on the bottom, your top half could steal everybody's money and your bottom half could steal their women." (43)

In Owens' novel, being "white on top" also speaks to a dimension of

hybrid cultural identity beyond race. As it happens, the brains behind the drug ring responsible for the cash drop that Billy and Will have found are full-bloods educated to think white. They have come to see Indians as victims of the white world. Using white logic, Paco Ortega thinks he has found the way to make the white world destroy itself with drugs that whites originally appropriated, out of context, from Indian cultures. He is consumed with ideas of revenge for the genocide committed at Acoma and Wounded Knee, furious with Americans' historic refusal to take moral responsibility for their actions.

Paco Ortega ultimately meets his demise at the hands of Odessa Whitehawk, an Apache with a Ph.D. in Indian law and Indian religion—the ultimate genre Western savage and the ultimate expert in “white-think” about Indians. She, too, is consumed with a desire for revenge. On the surface, Odessa would seem to be the liberated woman. With an assured physicality, she no sooner rescues Billy Keene from a barroom brawl than he takes her home, falls in love, and begins to fantasize that he can rebuild the home and ranch his parents had dreamed about and worked for before their deaths in a lightning fire. Even when it seems that Billy is about to reclaim his Indian identity through recuperation of genuine sexual desire for Odessa, a certain confusion persists. The name *Odessa Whitehawk* contains not only the seeds of gender confusion through its cross-connection of male and female elements from Siquani's spell, but the seeds of racial confusion as well.

Odessa has been named for the West Texas oil boom town where she was conceived, a link with natural resource exploitation and profit rather than the traditional landscape of her Mescalero ancestors. Billy's New Morality meets its match in Odessa: he is, unfortunately, too naive to recognize the plot line of the Old Western that would make Odessa suspect on two counts. She is not only an Indian but “a sexual woman.” In a West of moral dualisms, sexuality was most often relegated to the bordello. Occasionally, a sexual woman might be featured as an “Outlaw Girl,” a role that comes to fit Odessa Whitehawk clearly enough (Heatherington 79). Odessa is a woman in charge of her own sexuality and fully aware of other women's. Even as she saves Billy from being cast in the role of jealous lover, she suggests appreciatively that his ex-girlfriend must be a “great fuck” (77). Her machismo stands in sharp contrast to Billy's passive masculinity. He had been ready to crawl out of the local bar to save his skin, and Odessa knows it. Even if she admires Billy's survival strategy, it is not in Odessa's nature to accept a passive role. Asked by Billy if she is planning an escape as she intently surveys the road that took them to his ranch, Odessa quickly responds, “Maybe I'm

planning an attack. I like cowboys" (77).

Billy tries a quick reverse to regain control of the situation. Not entirely sure yet that he wants to develop a relationship, Billy cannily gives Odessa the chance to opt out, hinting that she, perhaps, should have second thoughts about him. He asks if she knows that most of the real old-time cowboys were gay, citing a scholarly book as his source of information on the subject. Billy's book, *When Men Were Men: The Real History of the West*, is a fiction created by Louis Owens, but Billy's facts largely square with the account of cowboy sexuality offered by Walter L. Williams in *The Spirit and the Flesh: Sexual Diversity in American Indian Culture*. Far from the ultimate symbol of American masculinity popularized by the Western, the working cowboy in a world without women, according to Williams, lived a predominantly homosexual lifestyle. If Billy spins an elaborate yarn about life in the bunkhouse, Odessa demonstrates a verbal skill to match her physical prowess, maintaining control of the conversation. When Billy attempts to dissociate contemporary cowboys from old-time cowboys, using a logic that equates heterosexual with Indian and homosexual with white, she counters sardonically, "Today you're all real men" (78).

If Odessa's response accommodates sexual liberation on one level, at another, it suggests a hidden misanthropy, and Billy does not miss her implication. It is genetically impossible for Indians to be homosexual, Billy admonishes Odessa, putting heterosexuality in the same category with alcoholism and outdoor acumen—the markers that have fixed Indian identity in the popular mind. Billy just may buy into the stereotypes, but Odessa clearly does not. A reference to her friends at Zuni pushes Billy's assertion to the level of irony, for the most studied of all Native American cross-gendered cross dressers was the Zuni man-woman We'wah.³ It is entirely possible to read Owens' gendering in terms of tribal identities. If Joyce Dugan, chief of the Eastern Cherokee, is right, the strong leadership role traditionally accorded women in her tribe has, in Native circles, earned the Cherokees a reputation as a "petticoat tribe" (Dugan). Known for their savagery even to the youngest fans of the television Western, the Apaches would, by contrast, rank at the high end of the macho scale.

His conversation with Odessa is not the first time Billy has introduced the subject of alternative sexualities, however. He has earlier suggested to Will that tabloid personals might be the key to an improved lifestyle. He pitches his argument to Will's Indian identity, insisting that living alone is "not natural. A man needs balance" (66). The balance Billy suggests is not strictly feminine. He seems to want a piece of this "balanced" action himself, advocating for a woman who fantasizes sex

with two men at once and a lesbian couple determined to lose their virginity together. What is striking in Billy is not a latent homosexuality but his immature heterosexuality, the chance, perhaps, to relive the most memorable sexual experience of his adolescence—the night he and Will lost their virginity with the Ruiz sisters, one couple in the back seat of Billy's father's car, the other in the front seat (115).

Madelon Heatherington, indeed, asserts that an arrested adolescent sexuality is the mark of the typical Western hero: when thrown into the company of a woman, Heatherington insists, "the cowboy's panic is not a homosexual panic at all; it is an *asexual* panic, a terror at the possibility of any kind of full emotional sexuality lurking anywhere" (86–87). Viewed from the perspective of its origins in the romance, where human sexuality provides the ultimate expression of the land's renewed fertility, the cowboy's refusal to make a sexual commitment bodes ill. While he may do everything in his power to save civilization from the scourge that threatens it, he refuses to engage in the only act that will assure its continuance. In the Western, according to Heatherington, the taboo against sexuality seems "designed precisely to keep fertility at bay" (87). Marriage, except for marriage to an Indian woman, "virtually unmans the Western hero, removing him from truly masculine pursuits, which are essentially celibate and therefore perhaps more holy as well as more fun than those accessible to domesticated males" (Heatherington 86).

Until the appearance of Odessa, the Indian woman who seduces him in his own bed, Billy never risks an emotional commitment despite a string of sexual involvements. He is abandoned by his most recent lover for his sexual indifference. Indeed, at the height of Carla's orgasm, all Billy can think about is trout fishing, in American literature perhaps the most holy and celibate of all the "truly masculine pursuits."

Will, by contrast, has made a long-term sexual commitment, fathering a daughter and a son, but in typical Western fashion finds himself unmanned by marriage to a white woman. There is no other explanation for the impotence he suffers as the drought on his land intensifies. Will's malaise persists until his wife chooses finally to make her life and career elsewhere. Jace Striker recognizes clearly that her husband's fundamental nature is "monastic" (127). What she really means is that Will is thoroughly domesticated. On her unexpected return home, Jace finds his room spotless, the Pendleton blanket on his cot "stretched so taut that not a wrinkle showed" (146). Throughout his marriage, Will had objected to animals in the house. Even after several years of living alone, muddy pawprints on the floor catch his eye instantly. For Will, the old house is filled with family associations, from his mother's books to the dirty cereal

bowls that have not stacked up beside the kitchen sink since his children left home. Even in this most feminized of spaces, however, Owens makes it difficult to disentangle issues of race and gender. Although Billy, too, lives on the ranch he has inherited from his parents, he lacks all feeling for house, home, and family until he begins to recoup an Indian identity through his attraction to Odessa.

Will's estranged wife sees herself clearly enough to recognize that she is a woman who intimidates men (129). Owens frames this perception not in terms of Jace's professional accomplishments as a corporate attorney but in terms of her physical presence—as a woman utterly comfortable with her sexual self. Jace offers a contrast to the other women in *Nightland* in her ability to actualize both her masculine and feminine energies; if she has developed her intellectual, rational capabilities and found practical application for them, Jace continues to listen to her intuitions and never relinquishes her commitment to family relationships. Indeed, a strong intuition of something seriously amiss with Will leads Jace to call home repeatedly until she makes contact, and finally to drive him back to the ranch (29, 126).⁴ Even Owens' choice of her seemingly androgynous name speaks to this masculine/feminine balance.

In point of fact, Jace shares her name with Jace Weaver, a Cherokee attorney and leading Native environmental activist who holds a doctorate in religion from Union Theological Seminary (Weaver, jacket notes). Weaver, a man, not a woman, has written on tribal sovereignty and the complexities of the relationship between tribes and state and federal governments with respect to environmental regulation.⁵ The connection is significant not only because Jace's return to her husband will be accompanied by the full restoration of fertility to their ranch, a fertility progressively diminished over the centuries of Euro-American tenure, but because it points to the ultimate instability of all identities.

Owens again figures both gender and race into the identity equation. If Jace Striker practices a profession traditionally closed to women, her law degree positions her with moral women of the genre Western, who stood as "the harbingers of law and order enforced by police and courts" (Cawelti, *Adventure* 222). The effeminate Code of Law stood in diametric opposition to the Code of the West upheld by "real" men. In her new position with the county public defender's office, Jace will, however, play a dual role, standing on the side of the law by standing against it. Applying Billy's race/sex logic to Jace Striker qualifies her as Cherokee if William Bevis is correct that the return to home and culture is the distinguishing feature of the contemporary American Indian novel. Her opposite, Odessa Whitehawk, whose ultimate goal is to leave the country,

would then find herself categorized white despite her Mescalero heritage and her academic training in Indian law and religion. Odessa stands as the tragicomic reversal of Jace Weaver's complex identity.

Owens further complicates the issue of identity by freeing sexuality from the male/female gender norm. The most erotic scene in the novel may be a moment of physical intimacy between Odessa and Jace. The woman who has bartered her sexuality for money like an Old West prostitute has nothing to gain by offering Jace a back rub, but with her touch, freely given, Odessa constellates a restorative energy that exists for its own sake in a moment that mixes memory and desire in the lives of both women. After the drought that crippled the Strikers' ranch and their marriage, the clue to the memory this moment unlocks for Jace is the beautiful gray-winged hawk she sees outside the bathroom window as she undresses for a shower, having just reclaimed the bedroom she once shared with Will from the dust and cobwebs that marked years of disuse. As birders will recognize, the gray-winged hawk is none other than the male sparrow hawk of Siquani's love medicine (Robbins 78-79). This straying wife has, indeed, found her way home. Jace's tears reveal the extraordinary depth of her connection to her husband so long suppressed. To open herself sexually to Will, however, is to open herself to the possibility of rejection all over again. When, after initiating sex with Will, Jace makes the abrupt decision to leave the ranch ahead of the coming storm, she is conscious only of its danger, not yet attuned to its healing potential.

In her own time, Jace is able to reintegrate her life, to bring male and female, Indian and white relationships into a new balance. The feminine connection that brings Jace to emotional awareness does not have the power to effect a change in Odessa's life. Odessa is a cold-blooded murderer. Her moral sense and her sense of empathy, like her closest childhood friend, seem to have vanished mysteriously. Jemmie and her family simply disappeared from the Mescalero reservation one day, never to be heard from again. Odessa's feeling for Jace echoes her emotional investment in this early relationship, which dates from an age when strong bonding between girls may suggest lesbianism. Jemmie, Odessa confides to Billy, was "the only purely good person I ever knew" (115). Seeing a photo of the young Jace, Odessa notes how much she resembles her lost friend. It is significant that Jemmie was white, not that Odessa hadn't been surrounded by whites her whole life. Her parents were moved to San Jose as part of federal Indian relocation efforts predicated on the expectation that Indian identity would disappear in the assimilation process. This is just what happened in Odessa's family, but living for a

year with her grandmother gave Odessa the opportunity to learn something of what her parents had left behind. Before her reimmersion in white culture she had a positive awareness of Indian identity balanced by a positive white identity.

Issues of race and gender figure largely in Odessa's criminal motivation.⁶ To secure a small fortune, she murders five men and, after forcing hostile sex on him, attempts to murder Will Striker. What Odessa seems to want more than money, however, is a stable, respected identity. She is clearly aware of her deracination, describing herself in terms that make her an integral part of the postcolonial New Mexico atomic landscape. She calls herself a radon daughter, a natural poison resulting from the breakup of a traditional way of life (117). Odessa plans to resolve her identity crisis with a formula Western escape south of the border. Once she gets there, she knows exactly who she will be—a rich Yankee among the Indians (117). It is the only identity her cultural alienation has prepared her for.

That Odessa should figure her tribal identity in nuclear terms has particular resonance for a Mescalero Apache. In the 1990s, Mescalero tribal sovereignty has been closely tied to plans for locating a medium range storage facility for nuclear waste on reservation lands. The tribe strenuously opposed legislation enacted by the State of New Mexico to prohibit construction of an MRS within the state. Mescalero plans call for siting the facility, financed by a consortium of electric utilities rather than the federal government, within a few miles of the Three Rivers Recreation Area. Owens links Odessa directly to Three Rivers. She tells Billy that it was here, near the town on the border between the Mescalero Reservation and the White Sands Missile Range, that her grandmother lived (114). Their mutual concern with money also serves to link Odessa and her tribe. Longterm revenue potential of \$600 million to \$1 billion was a serious consideration for the Mescalero tribal council that endorsed the MRS (Satchell 30). Investments in a major ski resort, a timber operation, and a cattle ranch have already made the Mescaleros one of the nation's wealthiest tribes. As tribal president Wendell Chino likes to point out, "The Navajos make rugs, the Pueblos make pots and the Mescaleros make money" (Carter 11).

One element that distinguishes the good guys from the bad guys throughout Owens' novel is the absence of the profit motive. It is not the only element, however. Paco Ortega, the Pueblo head of the drug ring, has no interest whatever in money. His sole motive is to avenge 500 years of racism and colonialism. Ortega is a generous man who takes good care of his operatives, sparing no expense for advanced technology to assure their

success over the narcotics agents. Content to drive a 15-year-old pick-up, he has never altered his own life style. Ortega lives like his neighbors. He doesn't want people to talk. And he maintains the utmost respect for traditional spiritual practices and powers. From the contemporary Native perspective, Paco Ortega can talk the talk. He perfectly articulates the truths that have given meaning to the work of contemporary American Indian authors. Echoing Leslie Silko and Scott Momaday, Ortega insists, "I know my relations, all of them. I know the stories that tell me where my people came from, where we are, and where we are going. How many people in America can say that? Isn't that a kind of wealth most of the world yearns for?" (171). Ortega, unfortunately, does not understand the nature of the story any better than Billy Keene. For him, "returning the gift" is an act of revenge, not an act of generosity. Only Odessa, who desires both revenge and profit, has a stronger motivation to evil than her ex-lover.

Owens' cast of Western characters would be incomplete without the canny "Mexican." The inclusion of Mouse Meléndez, indeed, gives Owens the opportunity to interrogate racial stereotyping from another perspective. Ultimately, Mouse comes face to face with his evil twin, the snaky Duane Scales, who remains confused about the racial/cultural interface until the moment he is removed from the action. "You sure are fucking white for a guy named Meléndez," Scales observes antagonistically (179). Paco Ortega's Black Irish/Cajun hit man has never been comfortable with his racial identity. In Ortega's words, he sees himself as "too brown for a white man" (179). That the Indian in charge should have a white sidekick comically reverses the Western genre tradition, but Ortega's relationship with Duane confuses the issue even further. To achieve his version of Western justice, Ortega is perfectly willing to play Tonto to Duane Scales's Lone Ranger.

The blond Mouse has never been confused or uncomfortable with respect to his identity, though both his friends and his enemies are, including Billy Keene. Mouse is strictly Caucasian and traces his ancestry to Spain, where, he insists, there are lots of blondes (88). On his mother's side, he's a Georgia "cracker." If in his first appearance Mouse seems to embody the stereotype of the macho Mexican lover with a knife, even Billy has to think twice. Mouse's machismo (always undercut by his ridiculous nickname) is also stereotypical biker behavior. In the conflict between nature and nurture, Billy sides finally with nurture. Reconciled to his old friend through an impromptu act of biker generosity, a barbeque in his own back yard, Billy forgives Mouse's knife as "a bad habit he picked up in California" (76). Mouse's honest admission of his whiteness,

however, leads ultimately to his demise when he admits to Paco Ortega that his ancestors came to New Mexico with Oñate. These were the very Spaniards responsible for the Acoma massacre, the first of the Indian atrocities Ortega is determined to avenge.

Scales's identity problem is even more complex than Mouse's. The novel's preeminent environmental spokesman, Scales wants not only dope and money, he wants to be more Indian than the Indians, America's environmental posterboys. Ortega has him pegged as one of Custer's Indian scouts, but if his bitter self-characterization is to be believed, Scales is "nothing but a bleeding fucking heart liberal who hates what the white man's done to his goddam red brother" (163). Though his environmental causes change minute by minute, the Mescalero medium range nuclear storage facility remains Scales's cause célèbre. He is only too happy to savage the Mescalero decision-making process with anti-nuclear truisms. It's little wonder that nuclear power makes Scales nervous. Bombs and bullets are closely linked, as Odessa Whitehawk recognizes: "Uranium turns into lead if given enough time to decay. So these bullets are really like tiny atomic bombs. Inside a person, the lead flowers like a mushroom cloud, and that person has his own personal Trinity Site" (118). Duane Scales wants nothing more than ultimate power, the nuclear trigger. He fires the first shot in the power exchange that will end *Nightland*.

Billy Keene's Old West death is ultimately his punishment for theft, though his plan to rebuild the profit-making potential of his ranch seems modest enough. Ortega and his entire gang die, and so, in the end, does his ex-lover Odessa—killed in a classic shootout by a skilled, lucky, and sexually reticent hero (Cawelti, *Six-Gun* 60). Like the formula Western hero that he is, Will Striker shoots only in self-defense. Unlike the typical hero, however, Will displays no tendency to defend a society built on profit. Jay Gurian describes the Western hero finally as "a commercial extension of the drive for private property" (7). However, when Will brings home his share of the drug loot, he hangs it promptly on an old nail in an abandoned well. The money simply disappears. Has Will accidentally effected the ancient deep well sacrifice practiced by the Cherokees' Mayan ancestors? With the disappearance of the money and Jace's return to the ranch comes an abundance of water that could, in and of itself, make the Strikers rich. Even so, Will has no plans to work the ranch: he intends to complete the restoration of the land by giving up ranching for trout fishing, letting his cows go wild and penning up his bulls Satellite and Trinity, those prizes of breeding technology. He will even sell the bulldozer that brought him a small cash flow on the fire lines during his

leanest years.

Will's decision parallels a similar decision made by his wife. Refusing to profit in any way from an affair with a partner in her law firm, Jace decides to return home and to serve the cause of justice as a lawyer in the county public defender's office, a job that has never made an attorney rich. Grampa Siquani's move to the Striker home assures that the story of the West will continue, now as a story of death and survival—of life as a whole. Indeed, the landscape of Owens' New West includes all life, physical and spiritual, the earth "heavy and dark, populated by the dead," held by living roots (216).

In this *Nightland*, Will Striker has survived, just as his dream suggested: before he was shot by Odessa, Will saw himself as the last man on earth, standing on a hilltop with his wife and children, water rising around them and sounds of dancing across the water. In fact, Will dreamed the archetypal Cherokee survival story, a story that Grampa Siquani once told the ghost Arturo (Ugweyuhí 105-06). This is the fourth time Owens invokes this story in *Nightland*, a number that in American Indian cultures traditionally signals conclusion. It is not death and dancing bones that hold Will's attention finally, but sunlight on the water, the origin and source of life. In the water, Will sees his own fleeting image among many others—a vision and a prophecy. With his daughter's pregnancy, Will is about to become a grandfather. In the assurance of mixedblood generational continuity, even the genre Western, albeit now a hybrid, survives, restored to its origins in romance. Thunder in this landscape clearly holds the promise of rain.

NOTES

¹Primarily known as a composer, in 1959 Jack Kilpatrick (1915–1967) became the first Cherokee since Sequoyah to be awarded a citation for his exceptional cultural contribution to the Cherokee Nation.

²See *Virgin Land: The American West in Symbol and Myth*, especially pages 109–11.

³Roscoe's *The Zuni Man-Woman* and Williams' *The Spirit and the Flesh: Sexual Diversity in American Indian Culture* are among the most recent studies of We'wah and the Berdache tradition.

⁴As Owens here interrogates the stereotypical race and gender associations with reason (white and male) and intuition (Indian and female), it is perhaps useful to consider the Jungian model of the balanced psyche. One of the

fundamental tenets of Jungian personality theory posits that, both biologically and psychologically, every human being is constituted of male and female elements (Harding 135). While the masculine element is linked to accomplishment (whether physical, intellectual, or spiritual), the feminine element facilitates relationships—connectedness at the emotional level (Jung 3–4, 21). Psychic imbalance, which inevitably manifests itself in an individual's erotic life, results from the refusal to integrate both masculine and feminine energies into conscious behavior: a woman who has suppressed the feminine aspect of her personality will engage in depersonalized sexual relationships having “a masculine aggressive character” (Jung 4).

The traditional index of power in a sexual relationship, “who's on top,” serves in Owens' novel as an index of psychic balance. With her lawyer lover, Jace finds deep erotic pleasure in both the passive and the active role, alternating between the subordinate and ascendant positions so naturally that the alternation itself becomes another dimension of sexual rhythm. The nubile Carla can finally assure her sexual gratification only by positioning herself on top of Billy, but this seems to be the last straw. Carla leaves the next day, finding a macho protector in Mouse Meléndez. The tenor of Odessa's seduction of Billy suggests that she will always be the woman on top. This is the position her law professor lover always expected her to assume, and while Odessa uses this fact to impugn his masculinity, this is the position she takes instantly when she initiates sexual contact with Will, who quickly comes to feel the hate in her erotic intensity. Odessa seeks her ultimate gratification with a rifle, but before she shoots, she flaunts her sexual potency in a calculated reversal of the captivity narrative: “And I'll confess I'm going to enjoy driving away from this place with a million dollars and part of you still inside me, an amazing amount of you really. It's too bad men can never know what that's like” (210).

⁵See Weaver's essay “Triangulated Power and the Environment” in *Defending Mother Earth: Native American Perspectives on Environmental Justice*, pages 107–21.

⁶It might be suggested that Odessa carries within her all the confusions of another Indian criminal who once seemed destined for success by every white standard—another White Hawk. Thomas White Hawk, orphaned at eleven, graduated from one of Minnesota's most prestigious college prep schools, a military academy selected for him by an ambitious guardian. A pole vaulter on the school track team, White Hawk set a new Minnesota state high school record his junior year (Vizenor, “White Hawk” 111–15). The young Lakota man was a premed student at the University of South Dakota when he committed the crimes to which he pled guilty. White Hawk murdered a local jeweler and twice raped his wife. All that White Hawk initially wanted was money to buy things for his fiancée (Vizenor, “White Hawk” 132–33). Just two months before the murder, he had bought her engagement ring from the man he killed (Vizenor, “White Hawk” 101–02).

Gerald Vizenor covered the White Hawk trial for the *Minneapolis Tribune*. In essays published in *Crossbloods*, Vizenor ponders a question that none of

White Hawk's examining psychiatrists considered: how a deep personal confusion about his Indian identity might have contributed to White Hawk's criminality. Vizenor asserts,

There is no information in any of the psychological reports about White Hawk's problems of unconscious and conscious links of identity, dissociation, and cultural schizophrenia. White Hawk has an Indian unconscious and a white man's conscious mind. . . . His behavior was controlled by pale greed and the social narcissism and violence of the dominant society. (149–50)

Juana María Rodríguez suggests that in this essay Vizenor also implies a deep underlying gender confusion stemming from Thomas White Hawk's relationship to his white male guardian (24).

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Wilderness Conditions: Ranging for Place and Identity in Louis Owens' Wolfsong

Susan Bernardin

With the 1991 publication of his first novel, *Wolfsong*, Louis Owens laid the groundwork for his ongoing fictional and critical explorations of Indian identity and American myths of the land. Begun in 1976 when Owens was working as a wilderness forest ranger at Washington's Northern Cascades Glacier Peak and rewritten in 1990 as he was finishing his second novel, *The Sharpest Sight*, *Wolfsong* traces the ecologically and spiritually devastating consequences of America's invention of the wilderness for Euro-Americans and Native Americans alike. Owens' scrutiny of foundational American myths of nation-building—myths grounded in the violent appropriation of land and dispossession of Indians—underlines the novel's sustained cross-cultural examination of the idea of the wilderness within U.S. and Indian cultures. In its dual and merging storylines of an environment and "one man tribe" embattled by the forces of multinational industry and a rural white logging community, *Wolfsong* both confronts and reconfigures the historically entwined tropes of the vanishing wilderness and vanishing Indian.¹ In doing so, through the identity quest of its "Stehemish" protagonist, Owens' novel moves us away from Euro-American egocentric visions of the land towards ecocentric visions of land long held by Native American cultures.

In contrast to his three subsequent novels, *Wolfsong* features a full-blood rather than mixedblood protagonist, a college-age Tom Joseph, who returns home to Forks, Washington after a year at University of California, Santa Barbara, upon hearing of his uncle's death. Echoing what William Bevis has called the "homing in" plot characteristic of many Native-authored novels, Joseph's homecoming catalyzes his struggle to reconstruct a tenuous relationship to a tribal past, identity, and commu-

nity.² In Tom Joseph's case, the process of "homing in" is not only hampered by the loss of his uncle—his most coherent link to a tribal identity and past—but by the haunting absence of a tribal community. Instead of interacting then with a tribal community, Tom "homes in" to the local white community that occupies his people's ancestral landbase, having supplanted the "Stehemish," a fictional coastal Salishan tribe, over the past century. Owens' decision to depict a fictionalized tribe in a specific region of northwestern Washington, a place imagined in intricate and knowledgeable detail throughout the text, serves several purposes in the novel. First, it enables him to dovetail his concern for contemporary land struggles in a place he knows well with a broader interest in how questions of Indian identity get entangled with dominant cultural perceptions of the land. Moreover, by featuring a protagonist bereft of a local tribal community, Owens forecasts what will become enduring concerns in his later novels as his displaced mixedblood Choctaw and Cherokee protagonists struggle towards a coherent sense of identity in the face of familial, cultural, and geographical displacements.

Tom's difficulties in accessing his past, his identity, and his place in the world are mirrored in the novel by intergenerational conflicts attending the future direction of his hometown. Its name suggestive of the crossroads faced by both the community and Tom Joseph, Forks is one of countless Northwest towns whose dependence on a now moribund logging industry has seemingly left its residents at an economic impasse. Located literally at the end of the road, and poised on the edge of the continent, Forks also signifies the geographical terminus of America's westering pattern of settlement and ensuing resource depletion. Hemmed in by two rivers and a towering Glacier Peak (or Dakobed in "Stehemish"), the community at times eagerly, at times hesitantly awaits the jobs promised by a multinational corporation's planned open-pit mine operation. Having already maneuvered around the Wilderness Act of 1964, Honeycutt Copper has started carving a road into the wilderness, which is also sacred Stehemish land. Setting into motion the text's cross-cultural readings of the wilderness is Tom Joseph's uncle, who before he dies of a heart attack in the woods has engaged in acts of eco-sabotage against this road construction, shooting at caterpillars and trucks.

As a microcosm of Euro-American perceptions of the land, Forks serves up a cross-section of logging, mining, and environmental claims on the disputed wilderness area. Like its model, Darrington, Washington, which has served as a center for recent controversies over old-growth logging and the spotted owl, the town of Forks reveals how logging has shaped whites' settlement and development of the area. Beginning with

the “Swedes and Norskies” who arrived in the late nineteenth century, through the Wobblies who burned a third of the valley in the early twentieth century, to the current generation with its lack of any sort of land ethic, the novel exposes, like rings on a cut tree, the town’s life-span of settlement, Indian dispossession, and ensuing resource depletion.

Through a host of characters ranging from an empathetic wilderness ranger to a racist bully, Owens reveals the fundamentally flawed roots of this white community, built on a sense of separation from the land surrounding it. Tom’s memories of his uncle Jim’s stories are a reminder that even the Wobblies, those “good, desperate men,” “would destroy Mother Earth” (140). It is this agonistic relationship with the land that has caused the community’s present-day identity crisis, as it confronts the demise of the logging industry. In its brief hundred-year history, the “intruders” of Forks managed to dispossess themselves of a livelihood as they “had cut and trucked their futures right out of the valley to the big mills in Everett and on to Japan” (114). The town’s imminent loss of economic sustenance caused by the clearcutting of old growth and by the creation of off-limit “wilderness areas” feeds the pervasive sense of loss and disappearance shadowing the white community.

More particularly, the loss of Forks’ founding identity shapes the intergenerational differences between non-Indian “old timers” and the younger generation. Throughout the novel, the older non-Indian loggers and prospectors lament “the unwinding” of their generation. That Jim Joseph and his longtime white friend, Sam, known as the “old prospector,” both die of apparent heart attacks in the woods, suggests their stories of the land, although based on different belief systems, are nonetheless intertwined. As Ab Masingale muses, “what people like he and Sam and Floyd had come to the valley for was gone. Somehow the loss seemed connected to the dead Indian, Jim Joseph, but he couldn’t figure out how” (123–24). Although unsure why he has made this link between a dead Indian and a “dying valley,” Ab has implicitly fused the vanishing Indian and vanishing wilderness tropes, long entwined in U.S. cultural history. Ab mournfully recounts how “once this whole valley and all these mountains was the finest danged country a man could lay eyes on. And now most of it’s clearcut and got roads through it and most of the game’s gone, and it’s a crying shame, and it was fellas like me that done it” (185). Like Tom’s logging boss, Vern Reese, an old man who “loved nature and was deadly efficient at stripping it bare” (150), Ab and others in this generation reveal a contradictory nostalgia for a vanished wilderness that they have helped to destroy. At the end of their road, the older generation views the loss of their way of life with regret, sensing that their active

participation in larger patterns of land exploitation has been turned against themselves or at least against their children. After violently removing from the environment what had shaped their self-styled identities as frontiersmen—Indians, animals, and old-growth—old timers such as Ab Masingale lament what they have “lost” even as he rehearses their hunting and trapping conquests of an earlier era in Forks: “Why I remember when there wasn’t no roads nowhere in these mountains and a man could walk out of town and trap the best marten and fox you ever saw and be back before supper. I remember when there was grizzlies in this country, and wolves even. . . Shot two wolves myself up the Whitechuck” (184–85).

Meanwhile, the younger generation, deprived of such memories, dismisses what it perceives as hypocritical laments. Embracing the job prospects of the open-pit mine, Buddy Hill, son of the “richest man” in the valley, retorts to Masingale that “Maybe you and all our granddaddies cut most of the trees and shot all the goddamned bears, but that ain’t our fault” (185). With his staunch utilitarian stance towards the land, Buddy then asks “what good’s a fucking wilderness to us, the people that practically own it?” (186). When one of his listeners brings up the area’s original inhabitants, Buddy voices standard arguments about “vacant” land used throughout American history to dispossess Indians of their homelands: “Hell, that was so long ago that nobody even remembers what real injuns looked like. Sides, they weren’t doing nothing with it anyway” (186). These intergenerational conflicts over the status of the land in turn are mirrored by fraternal disagreements between Tom and his brother Jimmy over the mining construction. Jimmy, a proponent of the mining, refuses to acknowledge his brother’s claims of the sacredness of the land because “Indian don’t matter nomore” (112). Moreover, he aligns himself with the younger generation that views the mine as its economic lifeline. At the same time, he also uses the language of loss and vanishing, as he tells Tom to leave the “dying” valley; otherwise, “you’ll rot like me and all the rest of these guys” (38).

Paralleling the stories of death and loss for the white community is the prominent and puzzling narrative absence of the Stehemish people, of whom the only remaining representatives in the area are Tom, his mother Sarah, who dies in the novel, and his brother Jimmy, whose vocal rejection of most Stehemish belief systems, combined with his excessive drinking, leaves him spiritually and emotionally distant. Tellingly, the Josephs’ physically disintegrating house is located “alone . . . at the edge of town” (24), signifying both this lone Stehemish family’s peripheralization by this community and the status of this seemingly vanished tribe. When Tom’s Flathead friend McBride visits, he asks: “where’s all your

people, where's your tribe, man, your family?" "Gone. . . they're just gone," Tom replies (195). From the beginning of the novel when Tom returns for his uncle's funeral and through his two subsequent visits to the three-generations-old Stehemish cemetery, Tom struggles with the disappearance of his tribal community, thinking "the tribes and clans had melted like July snow" (51).

Tom's use of a natural metaphor for his people's forced displacement and dispersal to "lumber camps and mills" and "the slums of Seattle"—a process that was anything but natural—reiterates countless such pronouncements of Indians' fate in the last few centuries. Shaped by the dominant culture's refusal to own up to its role in "removing" Native Americans, the notion of the "vanishing Indian" became, according to Brian Dippie, "a habit of thought" by the early nineteenth century (*The Vanishing American* 15). This "rhetoric of doom" uses stylized images of seasonal change and natural processes to displace responsibility for the "disappearance" of Native peoples onto inexorable forces of nature and "Providence." That Tom himself voices this metaphor, that he characterizes his people as "vanished" and "gone" elsewhere in the narrative, and that there is just one Stehemish family left in the community all seem to accord with these culturally entrenched stories about the death of Indian cultures. Moreover, the recurring site of the cemetery in the novel, as Tom buries first his uncle and then his mother, seemingly supports his preoccupation with the absent presence of his people. By having Tom struggle with the Euro-American trope of the "vanishing Indian," Owens underscores not only the real challenges posed by cultural and community loss but also the insidious power of that "habit of thought" once internalized by Indian people.

At the same time, the presence of Tom's family suggests a tenacious claim on the Stehemish ancestral landbase. Tom, his brother, mother, and uncle are survivors who managed to hold onto their land by working in logging and by selling "authentic Indian socks and caps" to tourists (24). Moreover, the deaths of his uncle and his mother catalyze Tom's efforts to make sense of who he is and where he comes from, efforts which not only work against the narrative of the vanishing Indian but gravely threaten the local community. Although he has spent only a year away from his home, Tom returns as an outsider who is repeatedly urged, advised, and warned to leave his hometown by enemies and family alike. Having refused both of the two roles offered to keep him in his "place," Tom appears as a dangerous stranger, a college-educated Native American who has inherited his uncle's opposition to the mining. First, the local contractor for the multinational corporation, J. D. Hill, tries to

co-opt Tom's threatening presence by offering him a job with the mining project, so he could "symbolize the future for Indian people, progress" (67). Then, sympathetic local Forest Service Rangers try to enlist him not only for his knowledge of the "backcountry" but also for his symbolic value as an Indian who could guard against further devastation of the wilderness. Over the course of the narrative, hostility towards Tom escalates as locals taunt him into a vicious fight and cause "accidents" on a logging operation which force Tom's boss, Vern Reese, to fire him. As Reese comments to Tom, "you're kind've an outsider now. It's funny when a guy thinks about it. Your people been in this valley a thousand years maybe" (152). Attuned to the bitter irony of Tom's status as interloper in his ancestral land, Reese suggests the final stage of land appropriation when indigenous people are transformed into outsiders. As such, Tom's very presence not only serves notice to the community for the claims he may make on the land but serves as an unwelcome reminder of how the town came into being.

Among the warnings Tom receives from townspeople are those given by Mad John, who shadows Tom throughout the narrative, dispensing his own apocalyptic reading of the land around Forks. A marginal yet omnipresent figure in Forks, Mad John earns his name following his return from the Korean War. With "steel fragments in his body and a metal plate in his skull," John serves as the community's self-appointed prophet, carrying "a sermon about Jesus, all tangled up in a battle between Jesus and the valley's demons" (21). As the first person of the community to appear into view when Tom first returns home, John gives root to the novel's agonistic relationship between people and the ever-encroaching forest and vegetation, spinning us back to the Puritans' original "errand into the wilderness." Described in this initial scene as one who tirelessly "hacked at the vines" (20) entangling a pair of rusted tractors, John carries on a modern-day version of the Puritans' spiritual warfare conducted against what was deemed "the wilderness condition."

Not surprisingly, Tom recalls the terror he experienced as a child when John sometimes confused "Indians and demons" (21). Like his Puritan antecedents, and echoing what Melville deemed the "metaphysics of Indian hating," John equates the wilderness, and by implication the Indian, with spiritual chaos and moral disintegration. Appropriately driving a Plymouth, whose pieces keep dropping over the valley, John provides a distorted mirror image to the other seemingly "crazy" character in the novel, Jim Joseph, who, according to Tom's brother, started spending all his time in the woods "raving about wolves and roads. . . He said they were coming back" (31). Similarly, Tom learns about John's

recent visit to the local bar, where he delivered a sermon, “all about how they was demons in the wilderness, things he’d seen, two-headed snakes and devilbirds and wolves that walk on two legs like a man” (21). When Tom hears this story, he “grinned at the picture, wondering how the white man had heard those Indian stories” (21). In his twisted conversion of Stehemish stories into demonic visions and voices, Mad John reveals his awareness of an alternative presence in this land which, however, he can only read as inextricably “other,” threatening, and consuming.

Providing the distant religious foundations for the townspeople’s contemporary secularized views of the land, Mad John preaches a vision of the land literally lifted from the Old Testament. At one point in the narrative, he emerges from the shadows to question Tom, as God had questioned Job:

“Canst thou draw out Leviathan with a fishhook? . . . Who causeth it to rain on a land where no man is, on the wilderness wherein there is no man? . . . Hath the rain a father, Tom Joseph? Out of whose womb comes the ice? . . . Demons, Tom. Be wary of ’em. . . It was demons got your uncle, and now they’re calling you. I hear ’em ever night, howling out there in that desert waste.” (146–47)

By reciting a string of questions taken from God’s rhetorical interrogation of Job, whose suffering had made him question his faith, Mad John similarly reminds Tom of the inscrutable powers wielded by his Judeo-Christian God.³ In his careful selection of images related to water and the Leviathan, John makes his lesson specific to their locale at the same time as he seems to warn Tom away from an animated and menacing wilderness. The Leviathan, the unkillable sea monster from the Bible which reappears as Melville’s *Moby Dick*, serves in Owens’ fiction as a central, circulating signifier of foundational American concerns with nature and evil.⁴ In this narrative, Tom recalls that the plastic, bloody crucifix in his family’s home was a “gift” from John, who had “gotten it in a trade. . . for a book about a crazy man and a whale that he’d gotten from a Lummi woman” (29). Just as Melville’s “crazy” Captain Ahab thought he could play God by wiping out what he deemed a malevolent force in nature, and in so doing became consumed by his hatred, so Mad John perceives coyotes as “demons” and mountainous rain forest as “desert wastes.” Like John Eliot, a Puritan known for his attempts to convert Natives, Mad John warns Tom of the perils posed by “wilderness-temptations” (Nash 29). A modern-day cross between Jonathan Edwards, whose demonized vision of humans (and of nature) lends both title and epigraph to Owens’ second

novel, *The Sharpest Sight*, and John the Baptist, whose “voice [was] of one crying in the wilderness,” Mad John maps Stehemish land as a spiritual wasteland, in need of godly conversion.⁵

In his furious mistranslation of indigenous stories of the land, John reveals a startling kinship with those who have also put the “wild” into the wilderness. As Uncle Jim once remarked to Tom about the creation of the Wilderness Act, land to be set aside “in perpetuity”: “It took white people to make the country and the animals wild. Now they got to make a law saying it’s wild so’s they can protect it from themselves” (81). Even the “Sahara Clubbers,” who come to protest the mining and who, according to Tom, tend to romanticize Indians and the wilderness, share with those who demonize the land a sense of the land as “other.” Through Mad John and other white characters in the novel, Owens points to the legacy of psychic, environmental, and human devastation bequeathed by America’s foundational perceptions of the land as antagonistic, separate, and alien. Following what D’Arcy McNickle called “maps of the mind,” the townspeople in Forks see the same land as Tom Joseph but through radically different lenses:

They met. . .during the long winters and slandered one another in rich detail, following ritualized patterns almost the way the Stehemish had once come together in the winters to tell their stories that told them who they were and where they came from, stories of Raven, Coyote, and Fox. For several generations now these intruders had gathered under the unvarying shadow of winter rain and snow to remind each other of their existences, and their signposts were the same mountains, rivers, and forests the Stehemish and Stillaguamish and Skagit had known. The map was the same but the signs pointed in different directions, toward different destinies. (121–22)

Tom’s description of how acts of storytelling link two opposing cultures to the same land, points to the larger, entangled story of American settlement on indigenous lands. Like the two names given to the most prominent landmark in the novel, Glacier Peak and Dakobed, both cultures derive their identity from their respective conceptions of the land. Tom’s capacity to see how the same landbase points to mutually incompatible maps of identity and place prepares him for his narrative journey toward a “different destiny” than that envisioned by his home community.

The novel’s narrative strategy of saturating reader and characters alike within the enveloping presence of land and water offers its own intricately detailed response to the welter of divisive claims on the land.

Rather than mere backdrop, the environment in *Wolfsong* serves as protagonist itself, shaping and even directing Tom Joseph's search for belonging and identity. From the first words of the novel—"the rain"—the novel narrates the constant presence of water as a force of growth, regeneration, and cyclical return, which counters narratives of vanishing and loss. As Mad John understood so well as he hacked at vines encroaching on tractors—more modern symbols of cultivating the wilderness—the land and water are in ceaseless motion, reclaiming this place back from the people. In the novel, we are continually reminded that the vines "took care of things quickly" (25) as they entangle abandoned railroad tracks, cars, even the Joseph's house. Fueling the town's adversarial sense of its surroundings are descriptions of how second-growth "crept closer for some kind of dark revenge" (114). Constantly threatening to dissolve the work of humans, water surrounds the town, described as "a shallow pool of wooden, one-story buildings lapping against a wall of granite" that "squatted nervously" between two rivers (22). Water also assumes central importance for Tom's identity quest, as it continually reminds him that the land is a dynamic presence, peopled with stories of how to live in this place. Remembering "the importance of water in the stories" (52), Tom recalls that the most important spirits live in water, and that water separates the dead and living as it traditionally carried the bones of the dead to mingle with the eternal cycles of salmon. Both literally and symbolically, the omnipresence of water in the novel works to direct Tom away from terminal narratives of cultural dissolution towards a recovery of tribal identity.

In Owens' introduction to *Other Destinies*, his critical study of the American Indian novel, he describes the importance of "the recovering or re-articulation of an identity, a process dependent on a rediscovered sense of place as well as community" (5). For Tom, claiming identity as Stehemish hinges on his capacity to both understand and affirm his relationship towards his people's homeland. Yet, as Chris LaLonde aptly notes in his essay, "Trickster, Trickster Discourse, and Identity in Louis Owens' *Wolfsong*," Tom must "find his identity before he can affirm it."⁶ If Tom can find his identity, then he will be able to receive his uncle's parting gift of his guardian wolf spirit, or *staka'yu*, which in turn depends on his ability to grasp his uncle's efforts to stop the desecration of sacred land. Yet, as we have seen, these tasks are hampered by the absence of a tribal community as well as by the loss of his uncle, who had tried to pass down to him what he knew about living in this place. With regret Tom recalls that he hadn't listened to his uncle's stories "like it would really make any difference" (105), and similarly remembers a vision quest

modeled on his uncle's that had failed because he hadn't fully believed in the reality of such a vision.

Indeed, it is Tom's very inability to see contemporary Stehemish Indians, and hence himself, as "real" that vexes his attempts to "home in." Returning after a year away, Tom is haunted and truly perplexed by what it means to be a contemporary Stehemish Indian. Not only must he disentangle himself from tired signifiers of Indian identity relayed by popular culture, he must struggle with his brother's belief, and even his own, that being Stehemish is part of a dead past useless for economic survival. Recalling that his brother had once dismissed their uncle's stories as "crap" as he chewed and choked on Red Man Tobacco (35), Tom echoes Jimmy's claim that "I don't know what Indian means" (112). Part of his confusion stems from the disjunction he sees between traditional Stehemish people and the enshrined image of Indians circulating in mainstream American history: "Short, dark people dressed in woven cedar bark weren't as exciting as Sioux warriors in eagle-feather headdresses on horseback" (83). Knowing that "books and movies seldom showed Indians who looked like the Salish people of these mountains," Tom must turn to the land and stories for reflections of his culture (83).

Tom's acute sense of estrangement from "real" Indians is exacerbated by the haunting absence of his father, killed in a logging accident when Tom was a baby. The only visible links he has to his father are a single photograph of a "dark figure" "more shadow than man" and a gravestone with Tom's name on it (54). Representing Tom's own shadowy connection to his heritage, the photograph reflects back a distant, unreadable image. Tom's disembodied relationship with this "remote, disturbing, figure" underlines his feeling that his father "was unreal as were all of them"—"them" referring to his Stehemish ancestors (55). Yet, through repeated acts of imaginative identification, Tom tries to close the distance between himself and his people: "He tried to imagine what it would've been like to have been a real Indian before the whites came and began to cut the trees—and pay Indians to cut the trees" (37). However, such efforts to forge imaginative links between present and past fail as long as Tom equates "real" Indians with a pre-contact world. Tom shows his attachment to static conceptions of Indian identity when he tells Martin Grider, a wilderness ranger, that the Stehemish "used" to call the mountain Dakobed. Grider replies: "Why do you say 'used to'? Don't you still call her that?" (167).

Tom's sense that his access to a "real" Indian identity is locked away in a distant past is also fueled by his inability to fully understand and communicate the stories of the land and the people. From his first night's

dream when “voices spoke in a language he couldn’t understand, a fragmented jumble of disordered words aimed directly at him” (41), Tom tries to decode what are, to him, inarticulate messages directed at him from water, from birds, and from his dreams. For example, the constant chorale presence of birds such as raven, jay, and hawk, who scold, mock, and observe Tom’s actions, points to his incomplete comprehension of himself and the land.⁷ At the same time, Tom indicates his own frustrated awareness that he “felt in some strange way that the message was for him if only he knew the language” (137). Meanwhile, at the town meeting where the mining operation is discussed, “he wanted to stand up to say something eloquent about the land being special or sacred or something. But no words came to him” (128). During his forays into the backcountry, Tom “wondered what the old, real names were for these mountains. His uncle must not have known either. . . and without them he must have felt mute, without the proper language of prayer” (94). Even more than his uncle, whose ties to his native language were attenuated by boarding school, Tom is estranged from the “few old words” his uncle had used, an “other-word language connected with strangeness and magic” (34). Silent when he wishes to communicate his beliefs about the land to Jimmy and others, and partially deaf to voices of the land, Tom feels disconnected from his community, from his heritage, and from his family.

With his identity contingent on his understanding of place, Tom turns toward the wilderness as a means of “making real” his uncle’s legacy of belief, story, and identity. Tom’s hesitant but persistent movement away from narratives of loss towards his uncle’s worldview is patterned through the narrative design of three separate “errands” into the wilderness. Corresponding to the three days of fasting required for the vision quest that his uncle had successfully undergone in his youth, these journeys move Tom towards completing this self-same vision quest which long ago had given his uncle the wolf as his spirit helper. On these journeys, as he literally follows both in the footsteps of his ancestors and in the imprints made by construction of the mining road, Tom remembers his uncle’s stories, trying to mesh these stories of the land and the people with himself. Finding that the earth, like the rivers carrying salmon and Stehemish spirits (82), is constantly in motion and flux, Tom begins to participate in the novel’s refrain of regeneration and cyclical time. Rather than perceiving the wilderness as separate from himself, Tom recognizes that “there was no demarcation, no place where he could say, ‘This is alive, this is not’” (83). Such recognition enables Tom to comprehend the “delicacy of place, a fragment of what had once been, with everything connected so carefully like the strands of a spider’s web across a path at

sunrise" (82).

Tom's second "errand" into the wilderness escalates his sense of kinship and responsibility towards his homeland. First, in contrast to the spectral voices heard by Mad John, Tom listens to "voices in the nearby river like a low-pitched chant" (159). After hearing his "name called softly" by the river, (159) Tom realizes that the "land was all movement, all flux, a wailing arc from birth to death" (159). At the same time, "he felt alone, cut off, a distant speck in the whirling world" (163). Perhaps for this reason, Image Lake, the site of his uncle's successful vision quest, "refused to give him back his own reflection" (163).

When Tom tries once again to duplicate his uncle's vision quest at Image Lake, he is "rescued" by a wilderness ranger, who thinks he is drowning. Although unready to receive such a spirit, Tom is ready to extend his uncle's acts of eco-sabotage when he sees for the first time the devastation wrought by the open-pit mine. Combined with the new knowledge that Image Lake itself is being drained for the construction of this mining operation, Tom suddenly imagines "his uncle shooting at machines, and he could understand it clearly for the first time" (169). In this moment of imaginative identification with his uncle, Tom hatches the plan for blowing up the water tank that has captured Image Lake. That Tom "memorized the site" (169) and "studied the area" (171) suggests that he has made a decision to defend what he now comprehends as sacred land.

After the death of his mother, Tom embarks on his third and final "errand" into the wilderness. Having half-jokingly told people that he was going to be a wilderness ranger, Tom embarks on a different kind of "ranging" of the wilderness. "To range" carries two distinct connotations: to wander or roam, and to patrol a specific area as a means of protecting it. Before this third journey, Tom has embraced the latter connotation of "ranging," by first "making things clearer" (206). After his mother's death, his last living tie to Forks save for his brother, Tom "releases" the gravestone markers and crosses of his family into the adjoining river, thereby following the old Stehemish practice of releasing bones into waters (205). Similarly, Tom releases the sacred water of Image Lake and in so doing, manages to cleanse the land, for the "ground was shining and clean" (221).

However, Tom's "freeing of the waters" also backfires by inadvertently causing the death of the man who "owns" the valley, J. D. Hill.⁸ Having first sabotaged his desire to "range" Stehemish land by blowing up the water tank, Tom now exchanges fight for flight as he heads for the wilderness of Canada. The rest of the novel follows a fugitive chase

through the wilderness as a posse of townspeople hunts him right up to the summit of Dakobed. When Tom sees that even Martin Grider, the wilderness ranger, has joined them (to prevent them from killing Tom) he thinks, “doesn’t he know we’re in the same business, ranging the wilderness?” (238). Seemingly trapped by the posse just under the summit of Dakobed, Tom’s efforts to follow his uncle’s instructions for purification—a three-day fast and cleansing by water—are rewarded with the “wolfsong.” Appropriately, he is given the power of song at Dakobed—“the very center, the reference point for existence” for Stehemish people (93). It is here that Tom realizes, in the sense of fully comprehending, his identity as his first night’s dream upon returning to Forks comes into being and he recognizes his part in a story about “climbing an icewall,” “the rising howl of the wolf,” “moon-bright snow,” and “a running shadow” (41). As the wolf “song inside him” and the wolfsong outside merge, “spinning in ever-widening circles” (249), Tom Joseph hurls himself over the summit of Dakobed, successfully eluding capture. Collapsing boundaries between the self and the outside world, this final narrative moment provides an ending in motion, as Tom runs northward to Canada.

With an ending that isn’t ending (despite the firm “END” stamped on the page) and with its all-encompassing presence of wolfsong, quintessential icon of a seemingly vanished, threatening wilderness, *Wolfsong* ends with the promise of return. An ambiguous refrain alternately voiced by Jim Joseph, as well as by a sweat lodge leader in British Columbia and townspeople, the belief in Indians and wolves “coming back” threads through the novel. Like the cyclical presence of salmon, a recurring reminder of change—the kind of change Tom’s mother says is happening—the refrain of return transfigures the dominant cultural narratives and practices of extinction that have long interlinked Indians and the wilderness.

At the same time, the novel’s ambiguous ending over whether Tom is running towards or away from his newly claimed identity and sense of home/land leaves troubling and vital questions about his act of violence, the continued absence of Stehemish community, and the fate of his brother, whose solitude in the valley matches the solitude Tom has experienced in the wilderness. As such, *Wolfsong* begins a process of examining Indian identity amid American narratives of land and nationhood that Owens will continue in his later works. Didactic in the best sense of the word, *Wolfsong* directs the reader away from the pathology of inherited Euro-American attitudes towards the land in the direction of an eco-centric, sustained commitment to the land. The lessons

explored in *Wolfsong* thus will be repeated in Owens' subsequent novels through characters such as Attis McCurtain, who knew of our "responsibility for everything within us and around us," and Hoey McCurtain, who speaks to the importance of "respecting your world, every little piece of it" (*The Sharpest Sight* 134, 57).

NOTES

¹Louis Owens, *Wolfsong*, 195. Subsequent page references will be noted parenthetically in the essay.

²In this essay, William Bevis argues that such novels "suggest that 'identity' for a Native American is not a matter of finding 'one's self,' but of finding a 'self' that is transpersonal and includes a society, a past, and a place." Moreover, "these novels are important . . . because they suggest—variously and by degrees—a tribal rather than an individual definition of 'being'" (585).

³See Book of Job, sections 38–41, or more specifically, 38.26; 38.28; 38.29; 41.1.

⁴See Uncle Luther's analysis of Moby Dick in *The Sharpest Sight* where he says in part: "the captain was out to kill the witchery, something the storyteller knew he couldn't do. The giant fish, like them giant white cannibals that us Choctaws killed out a long time ago, finally takes the captain down to the bottom of the ocean just like the *oka nahullo*. You see, that captain didn't know you can't kill evil, that you just got to see it and know it like the storyteller did" (90).

⁵See descriptions of John the Baptist, a lone voice preaching in the spiritual wilderness to "make the path straight" for Jesus. Mathew, 3.2.

⁶LaLonde, "Trickster, Trickster Discourse and Identity in Louis Owens' *Wolfsong*" 27. In this essay LaLonde provides a finely detailed analysis of Owens' structuring use of the trickster and trickster discourse to articulate Tom's identity quest. This essay also provides a sharp reading of an important sub-plot—the thwarted romance between Tom and his old girlfriend Karen—which I do not address here.

⁷See LaLonde's sustained attention to the central narrative roles played by trickster figures such as raven and jay.

⁸See LaLonde's discussion of how this act and Tom's subsequent flight can be read as a trickster act. Tellingly, as Tom prepares to dynamite the tank, raven eyes him with "intelligence and skepticism" (219).

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Landscape and Cultural Identity in Louis Owens' Wolfsong¹

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Hitchhiking the last thirty miles home for his uncle's funeral, Tom Joseph in Louis Owens' novel *Wolsong* gets a ride with Amel, a trucker he knows who makes his living hauling timber out of the valley. The reader is immediately privy to Tom's perspective: "The telegram had said, 'Our uncle is dead. Funeral next Thursday.' Jimmy's name was on it. A Kenworth loaded with cedar logs shot past out of the valley and Amel waved. It was traditional to wait four days for the funeral. He wondered where they were finding the old-growth cedar. Cedar was sacred" (20).

This moment suggests several of the novel's concerns. Through his jumbled perspective, Tom introduces issues relating to roles of family members and non-Indian friends in the context of logging, for example. The juxtaposition of cutting sacred cedar and the uncle's death implies that capitalistic destruction of the environment involves the loss not only of the trees themselves and of any sacred or spiritual value they may have, but that destruction also involves the physical, spiritual, and family lives of the people (both Indian and non-Indian) who live, work, and worship in the valley. The scene allows Owens to fuse the key elements in Tom Joseph's search for identity: reconciling himself with the landscape, gaining a sense of the importance of story and of his history and culture, and coming to terms with racial politics.²

The novel recounts a confrontation in America's war against the environment. The author suggests that in battle after battle, we ravage the land. As we do our logging, our mining, and our building of roads, we destroy not only the literal, physical land but we also destroy a fundamental spiritual connection to it. In N. Scott Momaday's terms, "we have

become disoriented. . . . we have suffered a kind of psychic dislocation" ("Land Ethic" 103). And as we lose sight of our fundamental connection to the land, we invite spiritual death.³

Like so many other Americans, Tom Joseph suffers such a dislocation. But there is a difference in what Tom faces. Perhaps some few may feel mental anguish when a wetlands is drained or a stand of woods is cleared and paved over, but for the most part, members of the dominant culture accept such devastation as progress. Whereas other characters in the novel—including Tom's brother—fail to establish an appropriate land ethic, whereas they fail to recognize the spiritual significance of the land, Tom reveres the physical landscape and turns to it for his spiritual well-being. The novel thus provides Owens a vehicle for delineating his Native American character's search for identity in a culture dominated by "white" attitudes toward the land. Indeed, Tom's establishing an identity depends on his ability to integrate physical and spiritual aspects of the landscape.

To achieve his integration, Tom must blend into a unified whole Salish concepts of man's relation to nature and the hard fact of the changing landscape of his home; at the same time he must learn from—but finally resist—predominant white attitudes toward the land. As Owens suggests in *Other Destinies*, much Native American fiction shows the reader "the possibility of recovering a centered sense of personal identity and significance" that is "entirely dependent upon a coherent cultural identity" (19, 20). Despite his uncle's teachings, Tom at first lacks a coherent understanding of Salish culture, and his visions (or vision quests) often seem to fail. In the face of these apparent stumbling blocks, Tom's education must include lessons in change and in the adaptation of non-local points of view. Owens seems to suggest that mere reliance on an incomplete understanding of traditional Salish attitudes toward the land will no longer suffice in the contemporary Pacific Northwest. Owens' challenge is to suggest a community for Tom and the reader; Tom must develop an ethic that will sustain a landscape that includes not only geological and biological, but also geographical, characteristics of a particular region.

Owens maintains that "Native Americans have fought an unending battle to affirm their own identities, to resist the metamorphoses insisted upon by European intruders and to hold to that certainty of self that is passed on through tribal traditions and oral literatures" (*Other Destinies* 21). Tom's achieving that "certainty of self" is problematized not only by gaps in his knowledge of Salish culture but also by the prevalence of white influence and the changes that influence brings about. As a result,

there exists a tension between Tom's compulsion to resist the metamorphoses of the dominant culture and his need to recognize and even adapt to changes in the landscape. This tension is indicative of the complexity and difficulty of Tom's position. In short, in his search for a centered sense of self, Tom must learn that his reverence for the landscape demands that he go through purification rituals, that he free himself from limiting stereotypes, that he remember the stories, and that he recognize the need to understand change.

There is critical debate concerning the extent to which Native Americans maintain a land ethic that non-Indians lack.⁴ And certainly even if one establishes that a particular group practices a land ethic, it is dangerous, even misleading, to generalize that practice to Native Americans of other regions and other nations. Aware of such dangers and writing primarily of Northeastern and Plains Indians in the epilogue to *Keepers of the Game* (1978), Calvin Martin argues that although they did not practice a land ethic per se, Native hunters "revered and propitiated" non-human nature because they felt that the animals were "inherently deserving of such regard"; the Native Americans "appealed to them for spiritual and aesthetic sustenance" (186). More recently, J. Baird Callicott argues emphatically that "the world view typical of American Indian peoples has included and supported an environmental ethic, while that of Europeans has encouraged human alienation from the natural environment and an exploitative practical relationship with it" (177). David Rich Lewis maintains a priori that American Indians "defined themselves by the land, by the sacred places that bounded and shaped their world. They recognized a unity in their physical and spiritual universes, the union of natural and supernatural" (423).⁵ Other scholars argue that the environmental movement has much to learn from Native American relationships with the natural world.⁶

According to several readers of Native American cultures and literatures—such as N. Scott Momaday, Vine Deloria, Jr., Paula Gunn Allen, and Louis Owens himself—many Native American writers retain an affinity, or attribute to their characters an affinity, with the environment that has, in large part, been lost by—or that is foreign to—Euro-Americans.⁷ Gerald Vizenor writes that some Native "authors cannot be separated from the enlightenment of their native traditions and experiences on reservations or from the national political and economic conditions of their time" (6). To this I would add that some authors cannot be separated from their connection with the landscape.⁸ Both as a novelist and as a critic, Owens himself declares that the ecological perspective is important for him in a way that is typical of many Indian writers. As he

explains in the introduction to *Other Destinies*, “Native American writers are offering a way of looking at the world that is new to Western culture. It is a holistic, ecological perspective, one that places essential value upon the totality of existence, making humanity equal to all elements but superior to none and giving humankind crucial responsibility for the care of the world we inhabit” (29).⁹

In establishing the parameters of responsibility, Owens relies heavily on his personal knowledge of the Cascade Mountains. This knowledge is evident in his carefully establishing verity through the place names of mountains, towns, and rivers. For the most part, he changes the names only of what is most immediate: what can be read as the Snohomish River and Snohomish tribe he changes to Stehemish (his fictional name for a Salish tribe). What must be the town of Darrington he calls Forks (a name borrowed from the Olympic Peninsula). The actual White Chuck Mountain he calls White Horse. Other place names are actual: the towns of Arlington and Everett, for example. The Stillaguamish and Sauk Rivers are real and accurately described, as are most of the mountains: Eldorado, Dome, Spider, and Mt. Rainier. (Like the town of Forks, Blue Mountain seems to be borrowed from the Olympic Peninsula.) Tom asserts the importance of names as he looks at the peaks: “he wondered what the old, real names were for those mountains. His uncle must have not known either, for he had never mentioned any of those names. And without them he must have felt mute, without the proper language for prayer” (94). Tom does know the name of the most important of these mountains, Dakobed (Glacier Peak).¹⁰ He recognizes it as “the white mountain, the center, the great mother” (92).

In addition to insisting on a knowledge of the mountains, Owens maintains that to understand and appreciate a given American Indian novel, readers must “take the trouble to learn something” about the particular culture and mythology of the writer and characters (*Other Destinies* 29). It is clear that Owens himself took care to learn about Salish culture in writing *Wolfsong* for at the heart of the novel is a particular physical and cultural landscape that is Snohomish. Take, for example, the role of hunting, a crucial part of a land ethic. As with any hunting or fishing community, the coastal Salish—like Northwest Coast Indians in general—recognize a critical, reciprocal relationship between the fish and the fisherman specifically, and generally between the human and the non-human community. Hence the Snohomish (Stehemish in the novel) can be seen to abide by moral principles that promote such a respectful and spiritual relationship. For the coastal Salish, human life is not privileged over non-human life; indeed, these people might even think

themselves to be essentially inferior to some of the world's non-human inhabitants, and for their survival they acknowledge their dependence on the good will of other creatures.

Owens suggests that an inherent land ethic distinguishes a Salish world view from the Euro-American. For the Salish, natural beings, such as deer, responded voluntarily to the hunter's needs. As J. Baird Callicott, among others, argues, the animals responded "as persons." Such an understanding of the response infers a social contract or social order, and "social interaction is limited by . . . behavioral restraints" (194). These restraints, or rules of conduct, make up an ethics. This is very like Momaday's assertion in "An American Land Ethic" that "it is possible to formulate an ethical idea of the land—a notion of what it is and must be in our daily lives—and I believe moreover that it is absolutely necessary to do so" (103). Momaday also writes of "reciprocal approbation" in which a person "invests himself in the landscape, and at the same time incorporates the landscape into his own most fundamental experience" ("Native American Attitudes" 80). In *Wolfson* this reciprocal approbation or interdependence is evident in the way the deer gives itself to Tom and his uncle; and the hunters acknowledge their debt by their ritualistic response of offering the bones to the water. According to Philip Drucker in his study, *Indians of the Northwest Coast*, "to return all the salmon bones to the water was one of the procedures believed to be essential. . . . This concept was extended to many other species" (155).

Even though he tries to hold onto such traditional beliefs, Tom comes home to a society in which only the human has value, importance, or standing—and only the non-Indian human at that. In the logging town Tom returns to, humans and human enterprises take precedence over all else: over the old growth pine and redwood, over the sacred cedars, over the endangered falcons, over the returning wolves, over the beleaguered salmon, over the independent logger, over the small-time waterworks operator, and over the local Indians. This devaluing of the non-human and of the human Other runs counter to what Tom deems estimable. He feels the severed link with physical place that alienates the human from the spirits. Unlike the others at the University of California at Santa Barbara, in another example, Tom could sense the sacred burial ground on which the campus was built: "Nobody else seemed to notice it, but I could feel those people there all the time. They didn't want anybody there" (64). Though he is not the only one to suffer from it, Tom alone seems to recognize the change that has brought about this alienation, and hence his suffering is acute.

Tom's uncle anticipates Tom's suffering when he tells his nephew

that his going away to school will be okay because it will not change him. Unlike his brother, for example, he will be able to withstand the changes others try to force on him; he won't forget who he is: "You'll go there and then you'll come back. It won't be like it used to be. Nothing will change" (88). Indeed, Tom returns with his land ethic intact. But meanwhile the world around him does change and thus Tom's uncle takes pot shots at bulldozers. Tom's knowledge of Salish culture is too fragmented to provide him completely with what he needs. He doesn't know the "real" names of the mountains, for example, nor does he believe he has the proper language for prayer (94). When wondering about eating the inside of bark pulp, he "wished he'd paid more attention when his uncle had explained it" (84). In relation to Dakobed, he "tried to feel what it had meant to his tribe," but it is not clear that he knows what meaning his ancestors ascribed to it. Sometimes he feels "alone, cut off, a distant speck in the whirling world" (163). As his friend McBride tells him, he is a "one man tribe" (195).

Such moments suggest the problematic nature of Tom's recovering Salish culture. Although connection with tribal culture is important, mere association with a Salish past is not enough to provide the young man a clearly centered self. The complexity is not surprising, however; both his uncle and his mother warn him that finding his identity will not be easy. His uncle tells him that "sometimes it doesn't go right. . . . bad things can happen" (86). And his mother warns him that "the changes are too much. There are things no one knows any more" (78). From listening to the stories, Tom learns "that a spirit was a difficult thing that might wander away all year and leave its possessor stumbling in darkness only to swoop suddenly down upon the man. . . . A spirit . . . might leave abruptly for someone with greater need. There were many spirits and many ways and times to find one" (85). Tom recognizes both that he needs a spirit helper and that it might be elusive.

As the world around Forks continues to change, Tom must retain what is valuable from his uncle's and mother's teachings, and he must continue to learn about the land; but at the same time he must learn from the changes around him. Tom's education in change begins when his uncle tells him that it is safe to go away to school, but he has to return home to get some important lessons. Bob McBride offers lessons in change by the ease with which he marries different cultures and by his insistence that he and Tom are brothers because both are descendants of Salish speaking tribes (18). To Tom, his friend suddenly "seemed more Indian in some ways with his seven-eighths white ancestry" (183). At a sweat in Canada, Tom comes to understand that "it was all Indian, but it

wasn't familiar" (189). Karen offers additional lessons in change when she says "you come back and you expect things to just be the same, like nothing ever was supposed to change. . . . things change" (177). Then she adds, "There's nothing for you in this valley any more" (178).

Another lesson in change comes just after Tom has again seemed to fail to complete his "vision quest" by walking on the bottom of the lake he calls Image: Martin Girder tells him that you "have to figure that it's all your country now, just like it's all mine. White and Indian don't matter, just like tribal boundaries don't matter any more" (173). Karen has prepared him for the notion that his home is no longer limited to this valley, for in a conversation with her Tom realizes that "Down there where the rivers came together and split again, *it wasn't his home anymore*, not earth-blood and rock, cedar red like blood, rivers cutting at the old ones beneath their stones, a pulse through the mountains like the heartbeat drum at one of the spirit dances" (143, emphasis added). By suffering through moments like these, by acknowledging change, Tom slowly claims an identity that is at once part of and separate from the particular landscape that shapes that identity.

Tom's uncle also suffers, and seems to have lost the power to heal himself. The power of healing is lost to him, perhaps because he is alone in his resistance to the loggers and miners. His encounter with the spirit dancers shortly before his death suggests this loss. As Marian Smith writes in *Indians of the Urban Northwest*, "Alone in the woods, [a man] became a mere parody of a human being. Such cases are sometimes described as having even lost the power of human speech (16).¹¹ Tom's uncle recalls having lost his voice when he first returned from the Indian school of his boyhood. His haphazard and futile shooting at the machines, moreover, is almost a parody, demonstrating the helplessness of one individual against the open pit mining enterprise. We remember he frowns "as the dancers began moving again in the undergrowth, swaying and stepping, back and forth" (1). Later he sees them "come out into the spaces between the trees and weave and step." He sees the spirits, and he hears the voices, but does not seem to understand. At this moment, he does think of his nephew, however, and he wonders whether "he had taught the boy enough" (5).

There are two points to be made here. One is that Owens shows the old man to be without control as mediator between the worlds of spirit and flesh. He is unable to understand the voices he hears—and his lack of control is associated with white interruption: "In the old days, a man might be thrown away by the people. Today, it seemed sometimes that the whole world was being thrown away by the whites" (6). The second point

is that the nephew, Tom, has been given a great responsibility. To take on that responsibility, however, he must have proper initiation and education. As his mother tells him, he needs to know “things no one can teach [him] now. . . . It’s too late” (78). Tom’s responsibility is all the more challenging in that he must take over where not even his uncle was in control; he must learn much for himself.

The uncle’s situation implies the fragility, vulnerability, and precariousness of Snohomish culture. Tom’s situation is more hopeful—“Tom won’t end up like his uncle. . . . He’s too smart,” says Bayard (199)—but he must maintain control; he must manage as mediator between the spiritual and physical worlds. According to Northwest Coast tradition, humans play an important role as mediators between different spirit realms. The human being is endowed with insight and knowledge about how the world operates but can tap into the spirit power only through proper ritual action. According to Pamela Amoss in her study of Salish spirit dancing, for example, bringing on spirit powers requires vision experience, which in turn requires a susceptible condition such as sorrow. Ritual purification—“achieved through bathing, fasting, sexual abstinence, and sleep deprivation”—prepares one to receive a vision (53).¹² Through grief for his uncle’s and then his mother’s death, his purifying hikes in the mountains, and his break-up with Karen, Tom begins to serve as a mediator as he becomes better able to sense the spirit realm.

Tom’s spiritual guide is the wolf. It is clearly Tom who is meant to be hounded (and helped) by the wolf spirit. It is to him that his uncle—who himself was previously called Wolf—makes this promise: “I’m willing this spirit to you, Tommy. . . . That’s one way we can do it” (36–37). Again according to Amoss, “Most people now receive a vision that was already in the family. The tutelary of some deceased relative lingers, hoping to come to someone in the family. It picks a suitable candidate and begins to trouble him” (53). Even as a child, Tom could “almost believe he could see the wolf spirit, *staka’yu*” (34). The first night he is back in Forks he does see the wolf (42); this wolf spirit accompanies him throughout the novel, and finally leads him along the mountaintop (248–49). By the novel’s conclusion, Tom has become a successful mediator in that through him the spirit and physical worlds merge.

The separation of spirit and physical place is typical of white culture, and the white settlers are at least partially to blame for the degeneration of Snohomish culture that Tom is challenged to retain. In contemplating Christianity, for example, Tom wonders “How could you separate the spirit from life and call it religion?” (51). This separation, typical of

members of Western culture, parallels the separation of human and non-human life. As Tom's uncle explains it, "When our people lived here long ago, before the white folks came, there wasn't any wilderness and there wasn't any wild animals. . . . it took white people to make the country and the animals wild" (81).

Tom recognizes the land, not as wildness, but as a place where everything is "connected so carefully like the strands of a spider's web" (82). According to Northwest Coast tradition, humans cannot perceive the true nature of spirits, but they can see them animated when they dance or sing. Tom perceives the wolf, which to him is not a wild animal but a beneficent spirit, perhaps his own uncle. Tom does not draw a line between physical and spiritual, nor between organic and inorganic. Tracing the roots of hemlock, fir, and cedar, for example, he discovers an enormous rootwad: "There was no demarcation, no place where he could say, 'This is alive, this is not'" (83). Nor is he willing to say this is wolf, this is not; this is spirit, this is not; this is uncle, this is not. For Tom, they are each and all simultaneously.

If Owens delineates the steps of Tom's spiritual regeneration and his reintegration into his culture with reference to several typically Salish customs, he also contrasts the tribally specific methods with other stereotypical means of coping with alienation and an individual's efforts to achieve spiritual equilibrium. Tom entertains, but quickly dismisses, the idea of drinking as a means of achieving comfort. After being fired from Vern's logging crew, he buys a bottle of liquor, but after only a few sips he empties the rest into the river, noticing at that moment that the fish (like himself?) are "like arrows in the deep water, waiting for the strength to return" (201). After his mother's death he thinks, briefly, that "it would be nice . . . to sit beside Jimmy and drink and watch the electric sign above the bar" (208), but he doesn't do it.

Owens also addresses the traditional "sweat" that Tom's friend McBride takes him too. Tom "was surprised at how good he felt after the pain. He felt clean" (193). The sweat is important, in part, because it allows Tom at least momentarily to feel that "suddenly he understood it all" (191). The sweat is important also because immediately afterwards, Tom's host, Aaron Medicine, articulates a promise of hope in the future, in the lands extending north through Canada. Aaron also hints at the possibility of a return. The sweat has been good for the body and the mind, but it does not alter the fact of the open-pit mine's destruction of the mountain.

In addition to going through a sweat and some traditionally Salish ritual preparations, Tom must also go through a personal awakening. As

he listens to Karen at one point, he notices that the “Waterfalls unmake themselves. . . . They are their own cancellation. . . . the waterfall didn’t really exist, had ceased to exist in the same moment it had begun” (136–37). Like the waterfall, Tom continually remakes himself. And he has trouble claiming an identity because, like the waterfall, his Indian self ceases to exist as soon as it is created; it keeps remaking itself. In remaking himself, Tom must repeatedly challenge typical stereotypes of American Indians that can keep him from knowing himself. He asks himself, at one point, what it would have been like to have been a “real Indian” (37). That he is stuck between the stereotype and the actual is evident when he contemplates his ancestors: an “image of a plains warrior padding silently through the forest came to him and he smiled. Books and movies seldom showed Indians who looked like the Salish people of these mountains. Short, dark people dressed in woven cedar bark weren’t as exciting as Sioux warriors in eagle-feather headdresses on horseback, the sun always setting behind them” (83). Tom smiles to himself and moves beyond this image. But he must repeatedly be on his guard against letting the stereotype mold his own sense of self. He consciously contrasts himself with Plains Indians of school histories and popular stereotypes: “he felt as if he were descended from some madman’s dream. Indians rode spotted horses over golden plains after buffalo. They lived in the light of the sun, where nothing was hidden and earth rose up to sky, in tipis, not in cedar-slab houses. . . . He was unreal” (54–55). At other times he seems to have a clearer sense of the complexities and multiple identities of Indians: “at the urban pow wows would be guys like the kid from Laguna Pueblo who sang and drummed and, between songs, listened to heavy metal on his earphones. That was what real Indians were like” (127).

For Tom—who, unlike his brother Jimmy, feels the necessity of retaining a Native American identity—remembering and valuing a specific, personal past is important. He must recall his uncle’s stories. As his mother tells him, “You’ve come a long way, and you must go a long way back to find out who you are” (78); he must find a centered sense of self which means he must come to terms with and overcome the stereotypes that threaten to limit him and define him as something other than what he is. He must separate himself from his own stereotype of Indians on horseback. He must believe in the possibility of a relationship between a guardian spirit and a human being—not because that is what Indians do, but because it is what he does, because it is what he believes.¹³ Through his responsibility to the landscape, he must also be one who can hear the spirits and thus serve as mediator between the two realms.

For Tom, finding an identity ultimately involves his integrating spirit and place. His search demands that he move through the literal landscape, demands that place be at once both physical and spiritual. Physical place is alive: Tom recognizes that the earth, the rock, the tree, the river are all animate, and in this recognition he acknowledges the spiritual significance embodied in physical place. As is supposed to be typical of coastal Salish, Tom recognizes that “everything had life or spirit; the earth, the rocks, the trees, ferns, as well as birds and animals, even the hail which fell from the sky, had a spirit and a language and song of its own” (Clark 7). In the mountains, among the huckleberry bushes and small trees, near the lake called Image—in these places, Tom “listened to the stories” and “came to understand that the power of a singer was a subtle thing . . . a complex web that drew upon all the forces of the mountains and brought them to a single focus like perfect silence” (85).

In *Other Destinies*, Owens maintains that “Native American writing represents an attempt to recover identity and authenticity by invoking and incorporating the world found within the oral tradition—the reality of myth and ceremony” (11). He thus provides a key to appreciating elements of his own fiction. Specifically, he keys Tom’s reliance on his uncle’s stories, and thereby offers a sense of the communal nature of an oral tradition that includes not only Tom and his uncle but also the narrator and finally the reader as well. In the mountains Tom thinks

of a story his uncle had told: as the sun climbed over the Cascades, two women were rolling hail. All day they played, rolling the hail from east to west, sunrise to sunset. Their laughter was thunder, and when they loved a man he had power, his wounds cooled and healed by the hail sweeping through the mountains from sunrise to sunset, east to west. He heard the hail soften and watched through the branches as the snow began to obscure the meadows. (216)

Although at the beginning there is a clear demarcation between Tom’s “real” situation and the situation of the story, by the end, the story and the “real” fuse. It is as if Tom first “hears” the storm from within the story, obscuring the boundaries between what is the “real” hail and the “storied,” as the storm itself obscures the meadows. Here Owens emphasizes and authenticates the “reality of the myth,” and at the same time he draws the reader into the equation.

In addition to authenticating the reality of myth for Tom within the narrative, Owens’ own story (the novel itself) demonstrates for the reader the importance of storytelling as a provisional strategy that is subject to

on-going revision of culture, politics, and place. Owens insists that story, place, and identity are linked. Because of the stories of his ancestors, Tom believes (as Pamela Amoss finds typical of the Salish) that “powerful spirits lived on the tops of the highest peaks” (8). He also knows that Dakobed is at the spiritual center of his existence: “They had woven it over thousands of years into their stories, telling themselves who they were and would always be in relation to the beautiful peak. Through their relationship with the mountain, they knew they were significant, a people to be reckoned with upon the earth. . . . This much his uncle’s stories, and his mother’s stories, had made clear” (93).

Through the power of storytelling and through his relationship with the mountain—even though his knowledge of Salish culture may not be complete—Tom becomes a person to be reckoned with in at least two senses. Virtually everyone in the valley recognizes a power that Tom embodies, a power similar to the power they recognized in his uncle. Tom is the person whom J. D. Hill, the wealthiest man in the valley, tries to win over; Tom is the one the bullies try to frighten off; he is the one his co-workers try to intimidate, if not actually kill. Yes, he must be reckoned with. In another sense, Tom gains power in blowing up the water tank even though in this act resides a troubling irony. Otherwise reduced to powerlessness in a culture that ignores an identity such as his, Tom resorts to the trickster act (as Chris LaLonde has called it) of destroying the water tank and killing J. D. Hill. As is typical of trickster acts, this one gets beyond the trickster’s control. With the loss of control comes a certain loss of power, and the act is ironic in that it forces Tom to flee, to abandon the very mountain he seeks to protect. But Tom also attains a certain power, both as a trickster figure and as one who undergoes a ritual purification. His uncle has told him that “When you are pure, maybe a spirit will find you and you will be a singer, a man with power” (217). Indeed, the spirit finds him as he flees toward Canada, yet for this flight to be anything less than mere resignation, Tom must embody hope as he runs across the mountains. For that hope, he must rely on his belief in the power of the spirit, on an endless wilderness, and on the power to return.

The reader is prepared for Tom’s journey from the opening pages of the novel when Owens begins mentioning Canada—where Tom is ultimately headed. When Tom first gets off the bus in Arlington, the bus continues toward Canada. He often notices the peaks stretching toward Canada, and he and McBride make a trip to Canada where they enter a sweat and where they are told that from where they are the forests stretch northward forever. Aaron Medicine describes the forest this way: “Those trees are the beginning. . . . You can go into those trees and start walking

and you never have to stop. . . . There are grizzlies in those woods, man, realbears. And sometimes at night out there you hear wolves. They don't know it, man, but we're coming back. All of us. Every damned one of us" (193–94).

Of all the foreshadowing suggesting that in traveling to Canada Tom can regain his power, his uncle's promise perhaps offers the most hope. Before Tom leaves for the university, his uncle says "When you come back we'll go for a long walk. When you come back we'll walk clear over the mountains to Lake Chelan the way the old ones did, and I'll tell you all the stories. Maybe we'll walk all the way to Canada, and I'll teach you all them things you ain't learned yet" (88). In a sense, his uncle—Wolf—does walk with him, does lead him, does teach him the stories. After climbing the ice wall, Tom turns "to run just as the wolf began to call again, and this time it kept growing, louder and louder and spinning in ever-widening circles through the thin air until it was deafening and seemed a part of the air he breathed" (249). Tom can be seen to escape with his life, but must forsake the particular place. It is clearly ironic that passive resistance to the open-pit mine and the consequent destruction of the mountain is futile, while active resistance, inspired by an awareness of the spiritual importance of the land, results in the forced removal from the very land that inspires spirituality in the first place.

The picture of Tom loping across the alpine snow toward Canada and freedom certainly presents a mixed image. On the one hand, his uncle and mother have died. The identity of his brother Jimmy is essentially lost to him and to the Snohomish. His girlfriend Karen has left him. The copper mine will go in regardless of opposition, and apparently he must abandon the mountains that give him strength. Despite these losses, on the other hand, Tom does retain his mother's advice, he remembers his uncle's stories and teachings, and he cherishes a clear vision of the spirits. He does have the wolfsong. He takes those with him to the mountains and woods that suggest infinite possibility. Tom imagines "waves of mountain ranges, black timber rising to snow and ice, wave after wave of mountains and deep valleys stretching far north across Canada and into the unknown territory of Alaska. . . . then still more wilderness, on and on forever" (207–08). What appears ironic in the spirit's becoming part of him at the moment he abandons the particular place from whence the spirit comes is thus actually indicative of Tom's spiritual growth. He and the wolf spirit have found each other and in each other's company they transcend place.

The conclusion thus suggests that we can see Tom as finally successful. He succeeds in that he survives to carry the wolfsong through

the woods. He ultimately refuses a cultural identity imposed on him from outside the landscape. He embraces the literal landscape and the vast promise of the northern woods. And like the wolf, he embodies the hope of a forceful return. In his migration northward, he retains the potential of achieving mythical proportions. Like Momaday's spirit-character Koshahn, Tom fuses spirit and place. As Momaday writes "There was no distinction between the individual and the racial experience, even as there was none between the mythical and the historical. Both were realized . . . in the one memory, and that [one memory] was of the land" ("Land Ethic" 104).

For Tom, the spirit and the physical landscape become indistinguishable; the wolf-spirit is as elemental as the air he breathes. If there is finally no distinction between landscape and spirit, Tom must be seen as one to be reckoned with upon the earth. And our job as readers is to come away from the novel as a part of that community, to come away with the recognition that we, too, must acknowledge our need for a reverential land ethic, that we, too, must see and hear the dance and song of spirits in the land, that in the air around us we too must hear the wolfsong.

NOTES

¹I am grateful to the guest editor of this issue for his insightful and helpful comments during a revision of this essay. A version of this essay was presented at the American Indian Literature Conference, sponsored by the Oregon Humanities Center, at the University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon, 15 May 1997. The term *landscape* in the title is intended to signify the geological, geographical, and biological characteristics of a particular region. The terms *wild* and *wilderness* suggest an attitude that, as Tom says, wasn't there "before the white folks came" (81). The term *land* might not be thought to include the geographical or biological aspects of place.

²The passage also juxtaposes the traditions of waiting four days for a funeral and of waving to fellow loggers. The passage introduces the complexity of a character like Amel who befriends Tom, who is a "good guy," but who at the same time participates in the harvesting of sacred cedar.

³The dilemma Owens' Snohomish (Stehemish in the novel) protagonist Tom Joseph faces is thus little different from what all Americans face. We witness, we passively watch, or even actively participate in the destruction of the land around our homes; we observe the building of shopping centers, roads, and subdivisions; one after the next, we witness the loss of a stand of woods where we hiked or a field where we walked our dog, or the open space where we introduced our

children to the wild. And like Tom and his uncle, we remain relatively helpless in opposing destructive development.

⁴Especially valuable treatments of this concern are, for instance, Tom Regan's chapter, "Environmental Ethics and the Ambiguity of the Native American's Relationship with Nature" (206–39), in *All That Dwell Therein* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1982), Martin's *Keepers of the Game* (1978), and Callicot's *In Defense of the Land Ethic* (1989).

⁵For a discussions of Native American relationships with the natural world, in addition to Booth and Jacobs, see Cornell's "The Influence of Native Americans on Modern Conservationists" (*Environmental Review* 9 [1985]: 105–17) and William Cronon's *Changes in the Land* (1983).

⁶See, for example, Annie Booth and Harvey Jacobs, "Ties That Bind: Native American Beliefs as a Foundation for Environmental Consciousness" (*Environmental Ethics* 12.1 [1990]: 27–43).

⁷In addition to the Momaday texts cited, see also Deloria's *God is Red* (1973, revised 1994) and Allen's "Iyani: It Goes This Way," in which she writes that "We are the land. . . . that is the fundamental idea embedded in Native American life and culture in the Southwest" (191). In *The Death of Nature* (1980), Carolyn Merchant (who is not an American Indian) writes that the European immigrants to North America by and large do not have the "immediate, daily organic relationship" with their natural environment and the appreciation that such a relationship engenders. She identifies the history of Europeans as a "slow but unidirectional alienation from the immediate daily organic relationship that had formed the basis of human existence from earliest times . . ." (68).

⁸As Sam Gill has shown in his discussion of the Mother Earth Goddess myth, one must be careful not to attribute to a Native culture a characteristic imposed by non-Indian ethnographers, anthropologists, and historians. Gill writes that he examines "a lineage of Western writers who have considered the Mother Earth figure as a native American goddess. From their writing, a story of Mother Earth emerges, a story attributed to native Americans but actually created by the writers themselves" (130–31). Despite this caveat, readers of American Indian literature should realize that certain assertions have been made. Attributed to Native Americans, for example, is a special environmental awareness that is part of their spiritual world view. Though such an assertion may well have its origins in a non-Native culture, once attributed to a particular group, members of that group are just as likely as non-members to accept, internalize, and then use those ideas in their own writings. I think specifically of the singer/song-writer Murray Porter who in his song "Colours" accepts the attribution of the Mother Earth figure as inherently Indian: "Ten thousand years we lived our lives/ In harmony with Mother Earth/ Taking only what we need to survive/ Not using her for all She's worth." In this context, it finally matters little where American Indians actually stand or stood in relation to the land. Owens himself recognizes that he writes with an environmental perspective.

⁹Although in this essay I limit myself to writing about *Wolfsong*, I see a

similar concern with Indian and non-Indian perceptions of land and spirit in *Bone Game* (1994). Consider, for example, this passage: "The mountains cup the bay in biblical darkness, and he feels the ghosts of ancient forests. The earth frets and cries in her sleep. White men come and murder the great trees, bleeding them into rich men's homes, and Christ walking on water is not enough, never raising the dead sacrificed for such sins" (6).

¹⁰According to Ella Clark, *Dahkobeed*, or variations of that word, is a Salish name for Mt. Rainier, but the word can also refer to any great white (snow-capped) mountain (27–28).

¹¹In his essay, "Trickster, Trickster Discourse, and Identity in Louis Owens' *Wolfsong*, Chris LaLonde also notes the importance of a "communal base" (33).

¹²According to Claudia Lewis in *Indian Families of the Northwest Coast*, "Central to the concept of spirit power was the belief that the animal world and the natural world were infused with supernatural powers whose aid and direction human beings could seek, through the vision quest. Rigorous preparation for encounter with the animal . . . which was to direct the choice of occupation and become one's helper began in childhood. . . . No one could expect great success without a spirit helper" (22).

¹³According to Amoss, "a denial of the belief in the possibility of a relationship between a guardian spirit and a human being would bring the entire system to a halt" (43).

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CALLS

We intend to publish a special issue of *S.A.I.L.* 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:

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Or, if interested in submitting an essay and/or reviewing a book or books, please contact me: John Purdy, Editor.

REVIEW ESSAY

Student Writings

ENGLISH 259: American Indian Popular Fiction (Spring 1997; Cornell University).

Instructor: D. L. Birchfield (Choctaw), Visiting Lecturer in American Indian Studies, Cornell University American Indian Program.

Course Description: A study of contemporary popular fiction about American Indians written by non-Indians, compared with contemporary popular fiction about American Indians written by Indians. Questions of authenticity of voice, appropriation and exploitation of culture, and literary value will be explored in novels and short stories from the genres of western, romance, mystery, fantasy, horror, and science fiction.

Required Readings: Robert J. Conley, *Go-Ahead Rider*; Robert J. Conley, *Mountain Windsong*; Cassie Edwards, *Savage Pride*; Peter G. Beidler, "The Contemporary Indian Romance: A Review Essay," *American Indian Culture And Research Journal* 15.4 (1991); Tony Hillerman, *Dance Hall of the Dead*; Tony Hillerman, *A Thief of Time*; Martin Greenberg, Ed., *The Tony Hillerman Companion*; "The Messenger Birds" "The Hunt for the Lost American," and "Othello in Union County," by Tony Hillerman in *The Great Taos Bank Robbery and other Indian Country Affairs*; Ron Querry, *The Death of Bernadette Lefthand*; Louis Owens, *The Sharpest Sight*; Jean Hager, *The Redbird's Cry*; A. A. Carr, *Eye Killers*; Gerry William, *The Black Ship: Book One of Enid Blue Starbreaks*; D. L. Birchfield, "Professional Writers' Organizations,"

Moccasin Telegraph: A Publication of Wordcraft Circle of Native Writers & Storytellers (“Part One: Western Writers of America,” Vol. 3, No. 4; “Part Two: Romance Writers of America,” Vol 4, No. 1; “Part Three: Science-Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America,” Vol 4, No. 2), 1995–1996 issues; class handouts and various other materials on library reserve; guest lecture by visiting author Robert J. Conley (UKB Cherokee).

Essay Question: In writing about American Indians in contemporary mysteries, some authors might describe religious and cultural practices that some tribes would rather not have revealed (in short, the more accurate the book, the more potentially troublesome it might be for tribes that are sensitive to these matters); some tribes might become objects of curiosity to a segment of the reading public, with readers mistaking the tribes for tourist attractions and creating unwanted intrusions in the lives of contemporary Native peoples. Discuss these aspects of Hager, *The Redbird’s Cry*; Hillerman, *Thief of Time* and *Dance Hall of the Dead*; Querry, *Death of Bernadette Lefthand*; and Owens, *The Sharpest Sight*.

Student Essay

Various forms of media have been used throughout American history to inform and influence the popular culture. Stories have amazing power to reach large segments of the population and influence their judgment. However, this power may carry repercussions far beyond the storyteller’s intent. The most popular form of contemporary media, the movie, demonstrates this phenomenon. *The Bridges of Madison County*, starring the popular actors Clint Eastwood and Meryl Streep, greatly influenced the number of people going to visit old covered bridges. Unfortunately, the sudden tourist attraction status of covered bridges may result in the untimely destruction of these bridges. *The Bridges of Madison County* was a love story, meant to entertain. It was not an advertisement to attract hordes of people to visit covered bridges, thereby prematurely deteriorating them. Nonetheless, that was the result.

Similarly, authors of contemporary mysteries depicting American Indian nations may simply undertake to entertain their readers. However, regardless of intent, featuring American Indians serves the larger purpose of making mainstream readers aware of the mere existence of contemporary American Indians and their sovereignty. Unfortunately, the authors’

descriptions of religious and cultural ceremonies and practices, while included to inform or educate their readers or substantiate the story, may also transform nations into tourist attractions, causing unwanted intrusions into Native peoples' lives. Therefore, while contemporary mysteries featuring Native Americans may have the positive effect of informing mainstream America, caution must be taken to avoid the unwanted repercussions.

After sampling five contemporary mysteries featuring American Indians by four authors of both Native and non-Native descent, it appears possible to write a convincing mystery that discourages the unfavorable "tourist attraction" outcome. Some of the better techniques employed by the authors include disguising locations and names, setting the novel in an already established tourist attraction, and hinting within the story that tourism was not welcome. Finally, the authors experiment with the text, comparing ideas to mainstream views and using the intermediate voice of a mixed blood American Indian to tie Native ideas into mainstream thought.

Of the five novels, *Dance Hall of the Dead* by Tony Hillerman was the most criticized for causing unwanted intrusions. Ironically, within the plot the characters believe they are being punished (i.e. killed) for revealing the Zuni religion to a non-Zuni, while Hillerman, a non-Zuni, attempts to describe this same Zuni religion to his readers. "Ernesto was afraid he had broken a taboo by telling George more than you're supposed to tell the uninitiated about the Zuni religion" (*Dance Hall* 165). In order to punish the offender, "the Salamobia chop[s] off his head with a machete" (*Dance Hall* 154). Even as Hillerman describes how sacred the Zuni religion is to the Zunis, he continues to share it with anyone able to read his book. Furthermore, Hillerman depicts *Shalako*, a sacred Zuni ceremony, as being a tourist attraction. "Normally Zuni Village held perhaps 3,500 of the 4,500 Zunis. Tonight seven or eight thousand people would be crowded here" (*Dance Hall* 216). As a reader, this leads me to believe the additional three to four thousand people are tourists and they are expected every year. In addition, neither the location of the events nor the names of the ceremonies or the American Indian nation were withheld or altered. Thus, any curious housewife after reading *Dance Hall of the Dead* could easily find out when *Shalako* is and plan a vacation (to the dissatisfaction of the Zunis).

Jean Hager, in *The Redbird's Cry*, prevents the possible unwanted intrusions into Cherokee life by setting her mystery at an established tourist attraction, the Cherokee Heritage Center. The center consists of a museum, an open-air amphitheater, and an ancient village where modern

day Cherokees portray their ancestors as they would be in 1700. The people who work at this center expect tourists and are trained to answer questions from outsiders. At the museum, a woman asks about the wampum belts.

“[A sign] calls them sacred. Do the Cherokees worship them or what?”

“We treat them with reverence,” Molly said, “because they were brought here from the old Cherokee country on the Trail of Tears. They help us preserve our culture.”

“But it says they’re sacred,” the woman repeated argumentatively. “I don’t get it. They’re just some old pieces of beadwork. I thought the Cherokees were suppose to be civilized Indians.”

“That was later, Sue,” the bald man said. “After the white man taught them better. All Indians were savages back when those things were made.” (Hager 59)

If this woman had asked an elder at a ceremony this same series of questions instead of Molly Bearpaw, a woman trained and expecting these types of attitudes and questions, the woman would have seriously offended the person. As it was, Molly seemed irritated by her. Thus if any of Hager’s readers got curious about the Cherokees and decided to make them their next vacation, the novel directs them to the Cherokee tourist attraction, not a ceremony like Zuni’s *Shalako*.

Jean Hager further attempts to protect Cherokee life by renaming political factions such as the “True Echota Band.” However, Hager does not conceal well known names like Wilma Mankiller, Principle Chief of the Cherokee Nation. By including facts while disguising sensitive matters, she makes readers aware of Cherokee people without intruding on their personal beliefs.

Similarly, Tony Hillerman begins to mask locations in a later mystery, *A Thief of Time*. After the controversy surrounding *Dance Hall of the Dead*, Hillerman must have realized it is sometimes necessary to rename places and camouflage locations to protect them. In *A Thief of Time*, Hillerman renames the location of the canyon where Ellie Friedman-Bernal disappeared to “Many Ruins Canyon.” This was done to protect the ruins in the actual canyon from tourist contamination.

Some authors employ a more subtle, humorous technique of discouraging tourism and unwanted intrusions. Ron Querry in *The Death of Bernadette Lefthand* warns readers that the ceremonies depicted are not meant for outsiders by describing how tourists are urinated on. Bernadette and her sister visit a Hopi friend during “*tikive*-the dance day” at Hopi. During the day, around noon, while the dancers are dancing, the Hopi

clowns arrived to pester people. “[T]hese particular clowns were up on a roof and they walked over and stood in a line and proceeded to pee over the side—and I mean right down on top of this bunch of people who just happened to be standing there by the wall watching the dance and minding their own business!” (Querry 120) A reader may think twice about attending Hopi’s *tikive* after reading that passage.

Louis Owens is even more subtle. He cleverly incorporates his note of caution to the readers in the development of the characters and the story in *The Sharpest Sight*. “The old uncle was Choctaw, really Choctaw, what he, Cole McCurtain, could never be” (Owens 65). As Cole, a mixed blood Choctaw, grapples with the concept of what it is to be Choctaw, he also defines boundaries for the readers’ participation in the culture. “Abruptly the distance his father had traveled was sad, tragic . . . They’d all gone too far, and Attis had been right. None of them, not even Hoey McCurtain, could ever go back. It was more than a mix of blood, and his father must have known it all the time he was remembering and reading, trying to teach his sons how to be Choctaw, growing his hair long” (Owens 72).

By demonstrating how difficult it is for a mixed blood away from his nation to participate in and understand the culture, Owens is suggesting to readers that it would be an even more difficult and unwelcome task for non-Natives to attempt.

Additionally in *The Sharpest Sight*, Louis Owens incorporates another effective technique to approach mainstream readers. He directly compares the Choctaw after-death explanation to the Christian after-death explanation through the character of Old Lady Blue Wood.

When a person dies, the inside shadow, the *shilombish*—that’s kind of like what white people call the soul—goes to wherever it’s suppose to go. Most people’s inside shadow goes to a good place . . . A person who’s murdered someone can’t go to that place. That person’s *shilombish* goes where the earth is hard and dry and nothing grows . . . Now, I’m speaking metaphorically . . . this may sound strange to you. But think about it. Is it any more strange than a religion that says one day angels will come blowing trumpets and all the dead will rise out of their graves? I’ve always found that idea rather revolting. (Owens 110–11)

Not only does Owens offer an alternate religious idea, he also provides a viewpoint of what someone practicing the Choctaw religious customs may think of the mainstream Christian belief. Owens’ techniques skillfully inform the reader of contemporary American Indians while discouraging the curious from intrusions on Native peoples’ lives.

When featuring contemporary Native American people in mainstream fictional novels, authors must always be aware of the unintentional repercussions their stories might have on the “featured” people’s lives. By altering names and locations of sensitive matters, setting stories in tourist areas, discouraging tourism within the text, and comparing aspects of Native culture directly with that of the mainstream, authors can assert contemporary Native American awareness without encroaching on sensitive issues. As these examples have demonstrated, American Indian nations do not have to be reduced to objects of curiosity for mainstream culture to become cognizant of both their mere existence and ultimately their sovereignty.

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Student Essay

Popular fiction that features Native Americans can increase non-Native readers’ awareness of contemporary issues facing American Indians. However, these novels also have the potential to do harm by leaving an incorrect impression, or by revealing too much. For instance, the reader may be mistakenly led to believe that they are welcome to attend the private ceremonies of a tribe, or sacred knowledge that was meant only for the initiated may become available to the uninitiated public.

The five mysteries that we examined in class each dealt with religious and cultural ceremonies or traditions. In Jean Hager’s *The Redbird’s Cry*, the central crime in the novel is the theft of sacred wampum belts from the Cherokee Heritage Center. For the most part, however, Hager appears to have avoided describing religious and cultural practices to the reader. Instead, she portrays life in the Cherokee Nation as quite similar to everyday life in the rest of the United States. If, after reading the mystery, the reader is inspired to visit the scene of the events in the book, Hager’s choice of setting—in and around the Heritage Center—would lead the visitor to where the tribe would likely prefer to have him or her visit. However, given some of the dismissive language in the text—such as when Hager refers to “the Cherokee origin-of-death *myth*” (62, emphasis mine)—it appears that these choices may have arisen from Hager not

being deeply involved with traditional Cherokee culture and religion, rather than any protective intentions.

In both Ron Querry's *The Death of Bernadette Lefthand* and Louis Owens' *The Sharpest Sight*, religion and cosmology of the Navajo and Choctaw tribes are central. Querry's story revolves around Navajo witchcraft, and for a reader who is outside of Navajo traditions and beliefs, it is difficult to know whether or not Querry has revealed too much information to the reader. Querry himself is a member of the Choctaw Nation and not the Navajo Nation, so one might presume that what Querry was able to learn about Navajo witchcraft while researching the novel is appropriate for a general audience, but such a presumption could be incorrect. While Querry does describe some religious and cultural ceremonies to the reader, the scenes are presented in a way that makes it clear to the reader that outsiders are generally not welcome. The most graphic example of this is the description of a visit by the main characters to *tikive*, the Hopi dance and feast day, in which Hopi clowns urinate on "people who just happened to be standing there" (120)—most likely visitors from outside the tribe.

In *The Sharpest Sight*, it is again difficult for a reader not intimately familiar with Choctaw beliefs to judge whether or not Owens has let the reader know too much or anything inappropriate. However, by setting the book partly in California, away from the Choctaw Nation, and partly in an unnamed remote area of Mississippi, Owens has avoided creating any sort of unintended tourist attraction. Further, the cultural material that Owens deals with—ghosts and bone picking—is private by its nature and unlikely to inspire tourism.

Highly successful non-native author Tony Hillerman's *A Thief of Time* is similar to Hager's *The Redbird's Cry* in that it does not deal extensively with Native religious issues. Hillerman touches on the Navajo belief that objects associated with death should be avoided, but for the most part, he stays focused on the crime and does not deal much with Navajo cosmology. He does make an effort to disguise the location of artifacts key to the mystery, stating in the author's note that "While most of the places in this volume are real, Many Ruins Canyon has had its name changed and its location tinkered with to protect its unvandalized cliff ruins."

Hillerman's choice to write *A Thief of Time* in this manner may have resulted from his experience with an earlier mystery, *Dance Hall of the Dead*. Within *Dance Hall of the Dead*, Hillerman describes the annual Zuni feast day of *Shalako*, and from the author's note, it appears that he wanted to make his description of *Shalako* as realistic as possible: "The

Village of Zuni and the landscape of the Zuni reservation and the adjoining Ramah Navajo reservation are accurately depicted to the best of my ability . . . The view that the reader receives of the *Shalako* religion is as it might be seen by a Navajo with an interest in ethnology. It does not pretend to be more than that."

Describing the morning of *Shalako* in the novel, Hillerman writes: "And with [the Zuni people returning home] came the curious, the tourists, dilettante Indian lovers, anthropologists, students, hippies, other Indians," (215) giving the readers of his novel the suggestion that *Shalako* is open to and welcomes tourists. Anecdotally, unprecedented crowds appeared at *Shalako* following the publication of *Dance Hall of the Dead*, and may have resulted in the festival not being held the following year. Although Hillerman's intentions were almost certainly benign, if *Shalako* was indeed canceled as a result of his book, *Dance Hall of the Dead* is then a chilling example of the damage the written word can do.

In summary, in these five mysteries, we have seen a range of depth in the consideration of American Indian religious and cultural ceremonies, from a superficial treatment in *The Redbird's Cry*, to in-depth treatments in *The Death of Bernadette Lefthand* and *The Sharpest Sight*. Further, in *Dance Hall of the Dead* and in what might have happened at the *Shalako* festival, we may have seen a dramatic example of what can go wrong when an author mishandles describing a religious ceremony in a novel.

So how should a novelist approach writing about American Indians if the intention is to inform his or her audience as much as possible while not causing harm? As it has been a topic of much discussion, perhaps it would be worthwhile to consider what has been written about the considerations that researchers should make when studying American Indian communities. In the Fall 1991 issue of *American Indian Quarterly*, in an article entitled "The Ethics of Research," Murray L. Wax outlined what he felt the responsibilities of those who conduct research in Native communities are. Wax calls for making an effort to gain an understanding of community, respect for confidentiality of individuals and the community as a whole and ensuring that consent has been gained from all involved. An author of popular fiction featuring American Indians would do well to apply similar criteria to his or her work. When writing about topics that may be sensitive, such as religion and culture, the author should proceed with caution and consideration of the possible consequences of his or her work. If appropriate, those with cultural knowledge from a community that is to become the subject of a novel should be consulted as to whether the topic is appropriate or not. Further, consent from one person should not be taken as consent from a group; instead, all

that are involved should be consulted. Perhaps if Hillerman had followed these steps, the unfortunate occurrence at *Shalako* would not have taken place.

Even if these measures are taken, it remains conceivable that a damaging book may be published, as unforeseen situations can arise. Still, if the authors of popular fiction take these considerations into account, it would greatly reduce such risk.

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REVIEW

Hotline Healers. Gerald Vizenor. Wesleyan University Press, 1997. 172 pages.

In *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 9.4 (Winter 1997) Sherman Alexie says, "If Indian literature can't be read by the average 12 year old kid living on the reservation, what the hell good is it? You can't take any of his [Gerald Vizenor] books and take them to the rez and teach them, without extreme protestation. What is an Indian kid going to do with the first paragraph of any of those books?" (7).

Granted, a 12 year old should have Indian books to read. But why should that eliminate other Indian literatures that can't be appreciated by a 12 year old? Isn't there room in the age-diverse Native world for all kinds of Native books? If one is lucky, a lot goes on in the intellect after the age of 12 and Gerald Vizenor has been the front runner in that area.

So I think another question is, what would a Native adult reader do if Native books were only on the 12 year old level? Where would the reader find a character like Almost Browne? Or help with the tricky business of mixedblood identity, hybridization and marginality? Or with coping with the past and reshaping the present? Or with the literary tactics of subversion which displace the traditions that exclude expression of the Native experience?

Vizenor gives me ideas. Blessed ideas. My new weaponry. He tells me I can squeeze the artifice. Celebrate contradictions. What an interest-

ing concept. I don't have to be imprisoned, but I can make a way around or through blockades. I may even learn something. Or if I am caught somewhere, say, in the contradiction of this contemporary world from which there is only one escape, at least I can make it an amusement ride of thought. Well, *almost*.

Because of Vizenor, I have a new shrine for the internal country in which I live. The statue of the trickster of liberty. I can access shifting borderlands where the closer I get to certainty, the more it quakes apart and that quaking is the certainty of the literary interstate and causal highways.

Actually, I came to *Hotline Healers* while reading another book I was supposed to be reviewing. I had to open *Hotline* so I could get souped-up enough to get through the adventure story of the other book, which was devoid of, how shall I say it, *lice*?

The issue of accessibility that Alexie imposes is an important one. But there have to be levels of Indian literature. Why would I bear the discomfort of education if there were no voice beyond twelve?

Yet, the question remains—what do you do with Gerald Vizenor?

Hotline Healers, published in 1997, is the latest Vizenor book, though he writes so often, there's probably another on its way. [Editor's Note: *Fugitive Poses: Native American Indian Scenes of Absence and Presence* was released by the University of Nebraska Press recently.] On the cover jacket, the book is called a novel of "eleven linked stories." The stories are fiction and the creative nonfiction of personal narrative and experience (many of the events are academic, literary, political and liturgical). The stories are fantasy, satire, commentary, autobiography. A virtual literature of the imaginative. A new genre of amplification. Covering just about everything. What other Native writer has gone farther and has done as much?

I think half of *Hotline Healers* is written so that we don't take ourselves and our loss too seriously. The other half is written so that we do. I don't mean here that the book is divided into halves, but that there are strands of messages which seem to say the opposite. There's a mix of the sacred and profane. A mix of humor and anger. A knowledge or recognition of what Vizenor is doing, yet the asking, what is this man saying, doing? What, specifically, am I to think about the recurrence of the monks and masturbation business, the seduction of animals, the unusual offspring? The *Manabosho Curiosa*?

In *Hotline Healers*, the narrator, who is the cousin of the main character, Almost Browne, says that we are to shun victimry and the political *Take Back the Americas* mindset. Vizenor (or his narrator) (or his

narrator talking about his cousin) says that we are to keep naming. Keep shifting. Common sense is at the base of his trickery. With cleverness he tags the reservation the barony. Further, at the wit of irony, or the savvy of intelligence, Vizenor names Almost's particular barony, Patronia. Is the reader supposed to think of patrician (aristocrat)? Patron (guardian or supporter)? Patroon (proprietor)? Patristic (the study of the writings of church fathers)? Patriarch? Patriot? A clash or absence of all of the above?

So what is this literature? For whom is Vizenor writing? Maybe in the theory of hermeneutics, we fill in the blanks ourselves and not look to the author for the answers. Maybe that's what you do with Vizenor. Because he doesn't give a diving board. A railway platform. But something like a dialectic of *inner language*—a self talking to parts of selves, or selves of other parts. The possibilities have been blossomed out by Kim Blaeser's important book, *Gerald Vizenor: Writing in the Oral Tradition*, University of Oklahoma Press, 1996.

Vizenor's writing is an accumulation of literary techniques and craft. It is an insight into the author himself. It is a step in the developmental trail of Native literature. It is a statement of language as nothing. Of language as everything.

We can see Vizenor's world in the process of being *maken*. The "*debwe* of new truth" which sounds like debris or dweeb to me, or something between the two. Or the Mississippi River starting out north of the barony: "There, at the headwaters of the gichiziibi, the great river, you can almost hear our creation in the traces of the stones and the bruises of the seasons."

I like the almost hearing. The bruises of the seasons. I like the word, gichiziibi. I don't know the Chippewa language. This may be the real word. But to an outsider, it sounds like a play between Gitche Gumee and Mississippi, and a play between other possible connotations and denotations. All the revelry and ribaldry that language has to offer. A cross-blood word play. The laser simulation of place and character, or character as place, or place as character, once heard and seen in imagination, now taking their place in story, opening possibilities and complexities to the possible and complex Native world.

Vizenor also gives us panic holes, heartlines and the hot lines of radio talk shows. He gives us terrific lines in *Hotline Healers* like "envy is bad memory," in which Vizenor reminds us if we realized our past, what we have in story, etc. we would know our place as "post-indian warriors of survivance" changed into the image of the unanswerable universe.

When I get back where I started, I open the first few pages of *Hotline*

Healers and ask the Alexiean question. What would a kid do with the first paragraph of the book?

"Almost Browne is a rather ordinary person in many ways. Ordinary in the Native sense of natural reason. His stories are an eternal rush of creation, the trusty tease of chance, and a tricky solace."

Well, we may have left the 12 year olds back at the station, but a reader who is older, who has had an experience or two with literature, who has an adult imagination ready for a trip, can say what he can do with the book. He can expect a rush of creation, a tease of chance, a questioning of boundaries. He can expect an energy field of a story. He can question reality and be comforted by the poker of Vizenor's words. The act of imagination uncovering any solace. The act of having to focus one's invented meaning into the story of inaccessible meanings on the Vizenorian stage.

Well, I'm willing to enter. I have no 12 year olds in the family. So I can move on until I have to circle back for them.

We learn Almost wears four wrist watches. He lives in stories not manners. Almost has a sure hand, heart and eye of survivance. He has never been a separatist. I like this facing head-on some heady matters in the headlands of Native territory. I may not be sure where I'm off to, but I've bought my ticket.

I learn there is another place than White Earth. A place which uses White Earth to transcend to. Getting back to the barony. What a wonderful name with connotations of the English and colonialism. But here the Patronian barony is a natural meadow of Native ceremonies and tricky stories. Vizenor has named and taken back his territory on his own terms.

The book seems dead serious, and yet it does not take seriously the self that is being dead serious.

Vizenor gets to the point on page one that takes a whole book for another author to get to. We're almost never the same, even in our own stories. Another's destination is Vizenor's departure. Vizenor takes the story of others as a stepping off point to talk about Native issues which transcend to issues in which anyone over 12 and maybe even some 12 years olds on some level can relate to.

Our Native presence is unnamed in the histories of the nation. True. How true. But instead of some diatribe, Vizenor names a new place and he names new folks Aristotle, Bones, Galileo and Swarm. He pokes fun at the unnamed narrator concept which is a tag of some Native American novels.

The names of characters are serious in a pseudo-Indian way. Instead of Doe in the Water, we hear Vizenor's ring: Ritzy, Chicken Lips, Casino

Rose, High Rise, Poster Girl. I was waiting to hear Smaltzy in the list of Vizenorian mongrel characters.

But wait, that must have been only the introduction. The first chapter begins, “Almost Gegaa Browne is rather ordinary, you know, and a homely person in many ways. Ordinary in the sense of natural reason and Native sovereignty.” There are celebrations of contradictions, turns of the seasons. Yet he amounts to more than humor, tease, and a generous memory. Almost is a hotline healer with a sure hand, heart and eye of survivance.

Vizenor rejects the role of sovereignty from the U. S. government. We aren’t going to be a nation within a nation. He gives us a little natural reason, a little common sense, horse-sense as my grandfather used to say. Though not having a horse, I don’t know what horses have to offer in the way of sense.

I prefer these stories told in motion. The new migration trail of making one’s way through the wilderness of the civilized world. Literary motion. Literary migration. Through the buffalo herds of words. Through the blessed hunt. Poking fun at anthropologists, but most of all at self. Vizenor’s pages are full of professors, lawyers, dentists, photographers, politicians, literary theorists, and a mix mash of the mush in our modern, modemed world.

Vizenor says the best stories in absence of the written word. There are the ironies of the orality of the blank page. Many of us face blank pages of tribal and ancestral heritage. But Vizenor leaves hints to a pilgrim through the ravaged land. I am not wiped out. I have the technique of survivance. I can create new words, new ideas, which create new land in the old way of creating by naming, by taking power to name, by taking habitation in that new place once named.

I can invent words like restelling, which is a mix of retelling or restealing or reselling my lost self to myself while restalking the microfield of literary casino management. I can write with broken voices. Interrupted fragments. I can bend the structure of language to explain the bend of my experience.

I can make a sense of identity and place with my naming of place in the process of the naming of place. If a 12 year old survives the rez he will need this info.

Well, I survive the book through myth and technology, Fabian and Macbeth, internationalism and pop culture, the Ishi Underground—the association of Native students, the calendar of academic talks, panels and conferences (“not knowing why he was invited, not forgetting he was there”), a chimpanzee and, of course, the bear.

Maybe it's what the new world needs: a shake-up of meaning, a restart. Isn't that maybe what they came for? An opening up of their limited possibilities?

Diane Glancy

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