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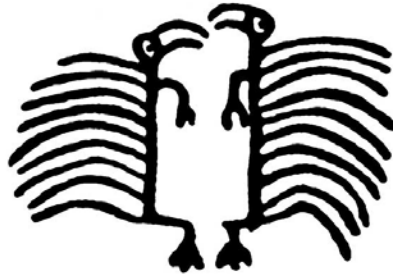
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## *The Kaupata Motif in Silko's Ceremony: A Study of Literary Homology*

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Robert Nelson

From a formal critical perspective, one of the most intriguing things about Leslie Marmon Silko's first and perhaps still best-known novel, *Ceremony*, is the recurrent presence of embedded text—passages set apart from the surrounding prose narrative and typeset to look more like poetry than prose: center justified on the page, surrounded by white space, and oddly skeletal-looking in the context of the margin-to-margin prose preceding and succeeding them. Most of these parcels of embedded text also read like old-time, traditional oral narrative—what at Laguna Pueblo they often call “hama-ha[h]” stories, long-ago far-away stories.<sup>1</sup> Formally, their presence evokes the question of their relation to Keresan oral tradition on the one side and to the prose narrative on the other. This question is located at the heart of the broader and equally intriguing question of how contemporary Native American poetry and fiction generally relate to the oral traditions from which they derive.

To help focus such questions, I'd like to direct attention to a single portion of the embedded text in *Ceremony*. In the longest of the approximately thirty<sup>2</sup> items of embedded text in the novel, Silko (or her invisible but omniscient narrative persona) retells the story of Sun Man's encounter with the evil katsina of the north mountain, Kaupata the Gambler. Silko's retelling of this story is a particularly interesting example of how she relates her novel not only to Laguna oral tradition but also to the ethno-graphic record of that tradition.

I say “retelling of this story” for several reasons. For one, we know from Ruth Benedict that the Kaupata story was still being commemorated

annually during the winter solstice ceremonies at Acoma and Laguna at least as late as 1930,<sup>3</sup> indicating that the story was still an important episode in the ceremonial life of the people, and we have no reason to believe the story wasn't still in circulation for Silko to hear one generation later. For another, Silko has spoken and written frequently about the novel's indebtedness to Laguna oral tradition, particularly as those traditional materials were told to her by the storytelling men and women on the paternal side of her family tree,<sup>4</sup> and I have no doubt that much of the texture, and also much of the text, of the novel derives directly from oral tradition the way Silko says it does.

However, the performance of *Ceremony* involves not only the "retelling" but also, in a more familiar mode for many readers, the re-writing of Laguna story, and the novel contains clear tracks of print-text precedents as well as the textural echoes of those remembered live voices. When Silko wrote *Ceremony* she had not only Laguna oral tradition but also a substantial ethnographic print tradition to draw upon, and it isn't difficult to establish the presence of this written ethnographic tradition in Silko's novel generally or in her version of the Kaupata story in particular. Several instances of Silko's indebtedness to the ethnographic record, one involving Leland Wyman's edition of the Navajo Red Antway ceremony and the other involving Franz Boas's Pacayanyi and Hummingbird Man stories, have already been demonstrated,<sup>5</sup> and a similar case can be made for the origins of Silko's Kaupata story.

At least three written-in-English versions of the story of Sun Man and Kaupata predate Silko's version in *Ceremony* and the virtually identical version published in her 1981 collection *Storyteller* under the title "Up North." The earliest of these three ethnographic studies is a story titled "Ko-pot Ka-nat" in John Gunn's 1917 collection *Schat-Chen*, subtitled "History, Traditions and Narratives of the Queres Indians of Laguna and Acoma"; the second is the story titled "Kaupata" published in 1928 in the English translation volume of Franz Boas's *Keresan Texts*; and finally there is Ruth Benedict's "Kaupata," one of the "Eight Stories from Acoma" published in the 1930 volume of *Journal of American Folklore*.<sup>6</sup> A partial study of the similarities and differences among these three texts, and of their relation to the Kaupata story titled "Up North" in *Storyteller*, has already been published.<sup>7</sup> The text of "Up North" and the text of the Kaupata story published as part of *Ceremony* are virtually identical, and anyone who has read both Boas's version and either "Up North" or the Kaupata story in Silko's *Ceremony* will have noticed the strong similarity, and in several passages the word-for-word identity, of these two texts.<sup>8</sup>

I will have more to say later about what I think we should make of such intertextual identities; first, though, a word about Silko's own two print versions of the Kaupata story. As others have already pointed out,<sup>9</sup> in Native American literary traditions context largely determines meaning. We should keep this in mind when considering the relationship between the Kaupata story that appears under the title "One Time" in Silko's 1981 *Storyteller* and the version that appears in her 1977 *Ceremony*. Considered purely as texts, the two versions differ by only a few words and one or two typefont variations. Their literary contexts, however, are very different. In *Storyteller*, the Kaupata story is one of 66 typeset pieces and 26 photographs comprising a delicately-structured scrapbook of Laguna story tradition in most of its many genres. Practically speaking (and consistent with Laguna aesthetics) the context for each piece in *Storyteller* is all the other pieces in *Storyteller*, all of which together are in turn, as Silko puts it, just a "portion" of "the whole story/ the long story of the people" (*Storyteller* 7): the proper context for any *part* of the "long story of the people" is the entire Laguna oral tradition. In *Ceremony*, however, the Kaupata story (like each of the other embedded stories or story fragments) appears formally as one of several islands in an otherwise seamless stream of prose narrative: formally, the immediate context for each of these embedded hama-ha stories *in the novel* is the prose narrative in which it is embedded.

In the novel, this formal relationship between text and context implies a functional relationship as well. Let me turn attention, then, to one of the important ways Silko's 1977 version of the Kaupata story is working within the novel, particularly with respect to the Mt. Taylor episode it formally precedes. Like each and all of the novel's other embedded texts, the Kaupata story's presence proposes an extra dimension of authority to the prose narrative. This extra authority lies not so much in either the accuracy of Silko's portrait of post-WWII Laguna life or the presumed authenticity of the embedded text, either of which might be sufficient to guarantee the novel's place in the canon of American literature.<sup>10</sup> Rather, it lies in the novel's ceremonial texture, a byproduct of what I want to call the *homological* relationship that Silko proposes between prose narrative and embedded text(s). I say "homological" rather than "analogical" partly because an analogy might always be a product of chance or individual (or even idiosyncratic) perception, whereas a homology, in the biological sense of that term at least, exists only where two or more analogous entities are derivatives of some preceding entity, the way that for instance siblings are related and share some characteristics because they have a

parent (or two) in common. An analysis of the relationship between prose narrative and embedded text which presumes homology rather than merely analogy as the basis of their similarities would go a long way towards accounting for the recurring sense that Tayo's experience on Mt. Taylor, like most of the other prose narrative episodes, is a ceremonial event by virtue of being a *re-happening* of that "long story of the people" of which he is, and is constantly becoming, a part. This "long story," that is, can be understood as the author, the genitor, of both the embedded texts and the prose narrative, both of which texts re-embody that older, more "original" pretext. This genesis gives rise to the authority of homology.

This homology exists along at least four axes of Silko's literary performance. There is first of all the homology of character. On this axis, Tayo and Sun Man are homologues, as are the spotted cattle and the stormclouds, Texan Floyd Lee and Kaupata, the two redneck fence riders and Kaupata's guard ducks, and of course Ts'eh and Ts'its'tsi'nako (Spider Grandmother).

There is then the homology of function. By this I mean the more or less allegorical correspondence between the two plots. I say "more or less" because classical allegory presupposes that one level of such a correspondence is more real, or more significant, or more in control of the structure than the other. In the case of the relationship between embedded stories and episodes of the prose narrative in *Ceremony*, though, neither member of the homological pair governs or generates the other; rather, both versions are embodiments of their shared "backbone" story.<sup>11</sup> The functional homology between the Kaupata story and Tayo's Mt. Taylor episode is rather straightforward: **x** [Sun Man or Tayo] goes to recover **y** [stormclouds or spotted cattle] from the mountain stronghold of **z** [Kaupata or Floyd Lee], first obtaining a template story from **á** [Spider Grandmother or Ts'eh] which maps in accurate detail the sequence of imagery and events to come; aided by this previewing story, **x** is enabled to see what his would-be deceiver sees, and then some. What gives the protagonist that margin of vision, of course, is the story **x** comes to this encounter with, compliments of Ts'its'tsi'nako, the Mother of All Storytellers and ultimately the origin of all homologies.

Thirdly, there is the homology of cultural context. By this I mean to suggest that all of the various versions of the Kaupata story, in voice and in print, are, equivalently, fleshings out of a single vertebra of the spirit backbone of story—that "long story of the people" of which Silko speaks in *Storyteller*. From this perspective, the portion of the prose narrative in which Tayo re-happens that story is properly read as one more equivalent version of that backbone story. As a source of the stories' authority, this

homological principle of cultural context—which is also a principle of *synchronicity*—should, I believe, displace the more familiar, but diachronic, principle that chronological precedence bestows authority. For instance, and to the point: diachronically, the identical wording of several passages in Boas's Kaupata text and Silko's embedded story begs us to read Silko's version as indebted to Boas's *and not vice-versa*. But it is also the case—and I'm saying we should accord this point critical primacy over the former one—that they both derive from the same source. This homological dimension is an inevitable, and indeed necessary, aspect of literary traditions in the oral mode: it behooves one always to keep in mind that sometimes subtle distinction between the story performance and the story that is being performed, and look to the preservation of the latter over the celebration of the former. There is no other way to imagine the value of continuity. Or of recovery.

The final axis of homology I want to point to is the homology of motif. It is in the nature of narrative that imagery indicates event; all literary allusion depends upon our ability and willingness to recognize that when, for instance, Ken Kesey dresses McMurphy in boxer shorts covered with white whales, he is invoking Melville's novel as pretext, if only for the purpose of generating a low-grade pun about a moby dick. In allusion, though, authority and meaning are transferred *from* the pretext *to* the present text; in a homological relationship, authority and meaning derive from the backbone story which two or more "retellings" are retellings *of*. Of course, many readers come to Silko's novel never having heard or read any version of the backbone story implicated in both the seven-page embedded Kaupata story and the Mt. Taylor episode which immediately follows it in the text of the novel. My point here is that Silko keeps faith with the long body of Laguna tradition in her novel by creating a homological relation between the two, even though this homological relation can easily be read as a merely allusive one in which the authority and meaning of the Mt. Taylor episode are derived from the embedded Kaupata story which immediately precedes it in the text.

The following are two extended working examples of this homological relationship between embedded text and prose narrative in the novel.

### **Starstuff**

One of the homologies of motif that Silko uses to weave the Tayo narrative in with the Kaupata story has to do with the star patterns that appear in both the pretext tradition, including Silko's retelling of it, and in the prose narrative. Near the end of the story, as Tayo is completing the



fourth phase of the ceremony just as “the sun was crossing the zenith to a winter place in the sky” (247), he comes to understand that “The stars had always been with [the people], existing beyond memory, and they were all held together there” (254), but Silko shows him coming to that understanding already in the second phase, the Mt. Taylor phase of his ceremony of recovery. Survival for both Sun Man and Tayo, first in the Mt. Taylor episode and then again in the Jackpile Mine episode, depends at least in part upon knowing how the constellations in the early night sky are configured at the time of the autumnal equinox.

In the prose narrative, one of the four signs that it is time for Tayo to undertake the second phase of the novel’s postwar recovery ceremony is the star pattern that Betonie draws for Tayo, the “Big Star” pattern, appearing in the north sky. In the prose narrative, Tayo finally sees this constellation appearing “in the north” behind Mt. Taylor in “late September” (178)—that is, at the time of the autumnal equinox. From Tayo’s perspective, this constellation visually “frames” Mt. Taylor, which looms to the northwest of Laguna village both within and without the novel; likewise it is an image that formally frames the Mt. Taylor episode in the text. This is the pattern Ts’eh directs Tayo’s and the reader’s attention to at the beginning of the Mt. Taylor episode by saying “The sky is clear. You can see the stars tonight” (178); it is also the pattern that Tayo perceives painted, in white on black, on the war shield hanging on the north wall of the otherwise deserted hunting cabin when he returns with Robert to collect his cattle at the end of the episode (214).

In Boas’s Kaupata as in Silko’s, the constellations that Grandmother Spider tells Sun Man to look for are the Pleiades and Orion rather than the Big Star pattern. But even without Grandmother Spider’s preview to prompt him, at the time of the autumnal equinox Sun Man would be able to solve Kaupata’s life-or-death star riddle just by being able to “see through” the leather pouches hanging to the east and the south on the wall of Kaupata’s high mountain abode. At that time of year, in these latitudes, the Pleiades and Orion appear to emerge in the east and travel upwards to the south, Orion following behind the motion of the Pleiades.

I suspect it is no coincidence that when we merge the orientating star imagery from the prose narrative with that of the Kaupata pretext, we get a sketch of the autumn equinoctial sky in both directions, as it appears looking to the north and west and as it appears to the south and east. The “vision” encoded in the one story complements *and completes* the vision of the other. In the traditional Kaupata story, this vision motif gets expanded one more step: in the final phase of his encounter with Kaupata,

and this time without a prompt from Spider Grandmother's story, Sun Man has to "see" that Kaupata's final ruse is to trick Sun Man into using the yellow flint knife to cut out Kaupata's heart. What makes Kaupata's offer a trick is that spirit, like energy in the First Law of Thermodynamics, cannot be destroyed but only transformed. That is why Kaupata cannot destroy the shiwanua (rainclouds) but only take them out of circulation. And that is why the proper gesture of triumph over Kaupata's trickery is to appropriate Kaupata's vision, as it were, and add it to the eternal "picture" by making his eyes the "horizon stars of autumn" (176), low in the south sky at the time of the autumnal equinox. In the prose narrative, Tayo never directly encounters the absentee Texan Floyd Lee who has fenced in the North Top of Mt. Taylor to keep the stolen cattle in and coyotes and Indians out, but then again he doesn't need to. He need only discover, in himself and in the world, the "heart" of Ck'o'yo witchery—to be able to see how it works by taking life *out of circulation*—in order to become one who is capable also of re-embedding that motive in the larger pattern of eternal verities represented by the stars in both the prose narrative and the Kaupata tradition that informs it.

My other working example has to do with those spotted cattle, the ones whose instinctive internal compasses always point them southward rather than north.

### **Clouds and Cattle: Life for the People**

One of the defter image transpositions Silko makes to "update" the traditional Kaupata stories is her substitution of speckled (or spotted) cattle for stormclouds. In either case, the missing element clearly represents ongoing life for the people; however, a herd of cattle seems not only infinitely more realistic, to a reading audience, as an object of recovery than a family of Cloud People, but also provides Silko with an opportunity to weave the image of her hero more clearly into identity with the object of his quest.

As Silko crafts it, both Tayo and the cattle are hybrids of a variety new to Laguna: the speckled cattle are originally Mexican, continually described as a virtual cross between cattle and desert antelope, characterized by the brown-and-white pattern of their hide, while Tayo is apparently originally Gallup-born, a cross between Indian and Anglo, "brown" and "white." The visual identity of Tayo with the cattle he is destined to recover is sealed a page or two before Tayo returns to Gallup to visit with Betonie, when Tayo returns to Cubero to visit the abandoned Lalo's place. His memory full of the story of his prewar encounter with the Night Swan

here, Tayo absentmindedly stripes the back of one hand with white gypsum adobe plaster; what appears on the back of his hand is “a spotted pattern” (104), white on brown. This is, of course, the color pattern appearing on the hides of the Mexican cattle. It is also a brown-and-white preview of the black-and-white pattern of night sky and stars on the war shield that will commemorate his recovery of the spotted cattle at the end of the Mt. Taylor episode. It is also the pattern in the finger-sketched sand painting that Betonie makes for Tayo to see at the end of the Mt. Chuska episode (152), a star pattern that is part of a perceptual map that, come the autumnal equinox, will guide Tayo to Mt. Taylor, where he will discover the stolen cattle and effect their recovery, along with his own, back onto Laguna land and back into the mainstream of Laguna life.

Silko reinforces the homological identity between the stormclouds and the cattle by attributing to both an identical motion with respect to the topography of the mountain. When Tayo liberates the cattle they move, as Ts’eh points out, the way both deer and water move when their motion carries them towards Laguna during the onset of the Koshare season in the Fall: “They went just like the run-off goes after a rainstorm, running right down the middle of the arroyo” (210), following the gullies and arroyos streaking down the southeast side of the mountain in the direction of Laguna village.

The cattle’s adherence to the topography of the Laguna landscape is probably even more homologically driven than I have suggested above. As mentioned previously, both the stormclouds of Keresan oral tradition and those to which both the spotted cattle and Tayo are homologically related in the prose narrative should be recognized as the traditional Cloud People, the *shiwanna*. According to both Boas and Swan,<sup>12</sup> the Keresan *shiwanna* come in differing forms associated with each of the cardinal directions (four in Boas, six in Swan); one of these forms, strongly associated with the north or northwest at both Laguna and Acoma, is *heyaashi*, the kind of airborne moisture most people would call fog or mist—that is, the cloud form that is most proximate to the land itself and most likely to replicate in its motion the shape of the land over which it moves.<sup>13</sup> We may recall that earlier in the novel one of the symptoms of Tayo’s shellshock is that he imagines himself as unselfconscious “white smoke” that conforms its shape to the walls of the Veterans Hospital cubicle to which he is confined (14-16), and most readers initially will probably agree with the Army doctors that Tayo’s felt identity with *heyaashi*-like physical texture is an indication of mental illness. Silko makes it easier to see, in the Mt. Taylor episode, how this same felt identity is a very positive step in Tayo’s

recovery of Laguna identity when Tayo, convinced he is transforming into an “unsubstantial” state such that anyone looking “would see him only as a shadow” (195), sees his powerful spirit ally moving in exactly the same way: “Relentless motion was the [mountain] lion’s greatest beauty, moving like mountain clouds with the wind, changing substance and color in rhythm with the contours of the mountain peaks . . .” (196).

Other appearances of the shiwanna in the prose narrative that are strongly associated with the motion of overall recovery include those “delicate” white egg sacs carried by the [grand-]mother spider Tayo sees at the spring prior to WWII (94), the pattern of cumulus-shaped spots carried on the back of the snake Tayo encounters on his way to Dripping Springs and his rendezvous with Ts’eh late in the novel (221), and of course (and most obviously) the “clouds with round heavy bellies” in the west and south who gather at dawn to follow Tayo as he crosses the river at sunrise to rejoin the People, an image that reiterates the motion of Sun Man’s children (who are also the ancestors of, and still life for, the people) following him down the mountain after his showdown with Kaupata.

I want to end these comments by drawing attention again to the issue of homology of motif, this time as it applies to the relationship between Silko’s novel, the version of the Kaupata story she gives in that novel, and the several ethnographic versions of the Kaupata story mentioned earlier in this study. In *Ceremony*, Silko’s embedded Kaupata story ends with Sun Man tossing Kaupata’s eyes into the southern night sky and liberating his children, the four varieties of shiwanna or stormclouds, from the four rooms of Kaupata’s mountain abode. Homologically, the following prose narrative episode ends with Tayo liberating his wards, the spotted cattle, from their captivity on the north top of Mt. Taylor. Silko also reactivates the last phases of the Kaupata motif again when Tayo confronts the Ck’o’yo medicine for the fourth time in the novel, this time in the person of Emo, at the Jackpile Mine. Like Kaupata in the pretext story, Emo invites his opponent to kill him, and like Sun Man Tayo somehow knows that opening a Ck’o’yo medicine man’s skull with a steel screwdriver (252), or his belly with a broken beer bottle (63), is like cutting out his heart with his own flint knife: a temptation that must be resisted if life in the Fifth World is to continue.<sup>14</sup> But there is at least one very significant difference between the ethnographic versions and Silko’s version of the Kaupata story, and consequently of her version of Laguna oral tradition insofar as the prose narrative stands as a twentieth-century re-happening of “the long story of the people.” The difference is that in all of the preceding print-text versions, the Kaupata story does not end so happily

the people. In Gunn's version, in which Kaupata takes form as two brothers who each lose an eye to the protagonist, the enraged brothers split open the mountain they inhabit, setting off catastrophic flooding that eventually results in the annihilation of the people; in Boas's and Benedict's versions, the blinded and equally enraged Kaupata lets loose rivers of fire which behave like volcanic lava, destroying everything in their path until the fires are eventually extinguished by the recently-liberated stormclouds. It would seem, then, that in her novel *Silko* takes a major liberty with the body of Laguna oral tradition in order to contrive a graceful ending to her prose narrative.

Unless, that is, we view the prose narrative of *Ceremony* the same way we are invited to view each and all of the embedded texts contained in it and containing it—as only a “portion,” as she puts it, of the “long story of the people.” Perhaps this unfinished homology of motif is not, after all, unfinished, then: perhaps *Silko* was merely saving this part of that story for later—a possibility at least remotely encoded in the penultimate portion of embedded text in the novel: “It is dead for now./ It is dead for now./ It is dead for now./ It is dead for now.” (261). In that case, perhaps we should be looking beyond *Ceremony* for the rest of the backbone Kaupata story. Perhaps, having articulated and set in motion once again the spirit backbone informing the several Kaupata stories by writing *Ceremony*, Leslie Silko was in a sense obliging herself, in keeping with her fidelity to the backbone of Laguna oral tradition, to write her second novel, *Almanac of the Dead*, as a natural extension of *Ceremony*—a novel addressing the darker side of the story that in *Ceremony* is cast so as to begin, and end, with the blessing of sunrise.

**Appendix A A Sample of Parallel Passages from Silko's *Ceremony* and Boas's *Keresan Texts***

[from Silko 170-76]

Up North  
around Reedleaf Town  
there was this Ck'o'yo magician  
they called Kaup'a'ta or the Gambler.  
[ . . . ]  
But the people didn't know.  
They ate the blue cornmeal  
he offered them.  
They didn't know  
he mixed human blood with it.  
[ . . . ]  
And one time  
he even captured the stormclouds.  
He won everything from them  
but since they can't be killed,  
all he could do  
was lock them up  
in four rooms of his house  
[ . . . ]  
The Sun is their father.  
Every morning he wakes them up.  
But one morning he went  
first to the north top of the west mountain  
then to the west top of the south mountain  
and then to the south top of the east mountain;  
and finally, it was on the east top of the north mountain  
he realized they were gone.  
For three years the stormclouds disappeared  
while the Gambler held them prisoners.  
The land was drying up  
the people and animals were starving.  
[ . . . ]

[from Boas, “kaup‘ata” 76-82]

Long ago.—Eh.—long ago there in the northwest region at Reed-Leaf-Town, there lived a man. Thus was his name, kaup‘ata'. And so always every day he gambled.

. . . and also there in a room in the east there dead bodies were hanging down. Always blood was dripping down. Therefore red cornmeal piled on a dish all mixed with blood he gave them to eat.

Then at that time from Ca'k'ak' and Cu'isi and all the (other) storm clouds, from everyone he won clothing and their storm clouds and also Ma'yet'cina's and Cui't'y r<sup>ai</sup>'s storm clouds and their clothing, all were lost. Then for this reason in four rooms he locked them up, because not in any way could he kill them, for they were storm clouds.

Then for three years never clouds came up and also it never rained. Then, therefore, the earth and the whole ground cracked. Then there in the east at koaik<sup>atc</sup>', the Sun-Youth spoke thus, “I wonder why it is never raining,” said the Sun-Youth. “In general every morning I awaken the storm clouds. From here I go to the north top of the west mountain and also to the west top of the south mountain and also to the south top of the east mountain and from here to the east top of the north mountain. There I always wake up the storm clouds”, said the Sun-Youth.

Go ahead  
gamble with him.  
Let him think he has you too.  
Then he will make you his offer—  
your life for a chance to win everything:  
even his life.  
He will say  
“What do I have hanging in that leather bag  
on my east wall?”  
You say “Maybe some shiny pebbles,”  
then you pause a while and say “Let me think.”  
Then guess again,  
say “Maybe some mosquitoes.”  
He’ll begin to rub his flint blade and say  
“This is your last chance.”  
But this time you will guess  
“The Pleiades!” He’ll jump up and say “Heheya! You are  
the first to guess.”  
Next he will point to a woven cotton bag  
hanging on the south wall.  
He will say  
“What is it I have in there?”  
You’ll say  
“Could it be some bumblebees?”  
He’ll laugh and say “No!”  
“Maybe some butterflies, the small yellow kind.”  
“Maybe some tiny black ants,” you’ll say.  
“No!” Kaup’a’ta will be smiling then.  
“This is it,” he’ll say.  
But this is the last time, Grandson,  
you say “Maybe you have Orion in there.”  
And then  
*everything*—  
his clothing, his beads, his heart  
and the rainclouds  
will be yours.”  
[ . . . ]  
“Heheya! You guessed right!  
Take this black flint knife, Sun Man,  
go ahead, cut out my heart, kill me.”



“Then also this I will tell you,” said she, “If you bet everything then Kaup‘ata'-Man will say to you, ‘What have I above on the east wall?’ thus Kaup‘ata'-Man will say. Then you will say, ‘I wonder what,’ thus you will say. Then again a little while you will think. Then you will say, ‘Maybe beads,’ you will say. Again you will say, ‘I wonder what,’ you will say. ‘I guess pebbles,’ you will say. Then again he says thus, ‘What have I up there?’” thus she said. “Then again you will say, ‘I wonder what, — maybe honey-bees.’ Then again he will speak for the last time. Then you will say, ‘Oh, I think the Pleiades.’ Then Kaup‘ata' will say, ‘Heheya,’ thus he will say. ‘Never anybody told me like this,’ Kaup‘ata' will say. Again he will ask you. There above in the south is something that is inside. Kaup‘ata' will say, ‘What is up there on the east wall that I have?’ thus he will say. Then you on your part will say, ‘I wonder what it may be that he keeps up there?’ thus you will say. For a little while you will think. Then you will say, ‘Maybe bumble-bees,’ you will say. ‘No, it isn’t that,’ Kaup‘ata' will say. Then again you will say, ‘Maybe butterflies,’ you will say. Then again for the last time Kaup‘ata' will say. ‘No, not that;’ and again you will say, ‘Maybe these are ants,’ you will say. ‘No, not that,’ Kaup‘ata' will say, and so for the last time he will speak. Then you will say ‘Maybe, the Orion,’ you will say,” said Old-Woman-Spider-Woman. “And then everything, his clothing, the storm clouds and his heart you will win,” thus said Old-Woman-Spider-Woman.

Kaup'a'ta lay down on the floor  
with his head toward the east.  
But Sun Man knew Kaup'a'ta was magical  
and he couldn't be killed anyway.  
Kaup'a'ta was going to lie there  
and pretend to be dead.  
So Sun Man knew what to do:  
He took the flint blade  
and he cut out the Gambler's eyes  
He threw them into the south sky  
and they became the horizon stars of autumn.

“Heheya’! heheya’!” said Kaup’ata’. [. . .] “Now go ahead, kill me,” said he. “You will take the yellow knife.” Then Sun-Youth took it. Then Kaup’ata’ there to the east lay down on his back. Then Sun-Youth sat down there. For a while he thought what he would do to him. Then Sun-Youth spoke thus, “I wonder, am I going to kill him?” said he. Then he was looking at his face and his body. After a while spoke Sun-Youth, “It comes to this. Let me take out his eyes,” said he. “Presently then up to the north let me throw them,” said he. “because he has supernatural power,” said Sun-Youth. Then he took the flint knife. Then one eye he took out and again the other eye he took out. Then (up) went out Sun-Youth. Then Kaup’ata’s eyes southward he threw up. Then Kaup’ata’s eyes became stars.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>More precisely, the stories that Silko chooses to embed in her novel come mostly from the conventional category of Keresan oral narrative called “*maaíma uúbeétaányi*,” those “true” stories that get reenacted in the ceremonies (as distinguished from secular coyote stories and stories about talking frogs and wrens that are also included in the term “*hama-ha*”).

<sup>2</sup>This figure is give or take, depending in part on what one considers to be an embedded story as opposed, perhaps, to epigraphic material or merely stylized prose narrative. I count 31 passages of what I’m calling “embedded text.” In the order in which they occur, these include (items enumerated in **boldface** are elements of a single extended storyline, the one I have referred to elsewhere as the nine-part “backbone story” of the novel; the four preceded by the bracketed letters a-d can be found also in the text of Leland Wyman’s *Red Antway*):

1. Ts’its’tsi’ nako
2. Ceremony
3. *What she said*
4. sunrise
5. Reed Woman-Corn Woman argument
6. Kuoosh’s preamble to Scalp Ceremony
7. **[1] Pacayanyi**
8. **[2] Hummingbird appears**
9. Emo’s war/coyote story

10. [3] **making Green Fly**
11. [4] **Hummingbird and Green Fly travel to “fourth world / below”**
12. [5] **Nau’ts’ityi’ steers Hummingbird and Green Fly to Buzzard**
13. Tayo’s (Robert’s? Hummingbird’s? anyone’s?) Gallup recall [PROSE]
14. [6] **Buzzard demands tobacco**
15. boy -> bear transformation
16. note on bear people and witches [PROSE]
17. origins of witchery
18. [a] hunter -> coyote transformation
19. [b] departure-recovery transformation chant
20. [7] **Nau’ts’ityi’ steers Hummingbird and Green Fly to Caterpillar**
21. [c] coyoteskin-witchery connection
22. Kaupata and Sun Man
23. [8] **Caterpillar gives tobacco to Hummingbird and Green Fly**
24. sunrise
25. hunter’s deer song
26. Arrowboy spies on Ck’o’yo workers
27. [9] **Buzzard purifies the town, Nau’ts’ityi’ returns**
28. Elders’ “Amooh” chant
29. [d] unraveling the dead coyote skin
30. return chant for the witchery
31. sunrise

<sup>3</sup>See Ruth Benedict, n. 1 to “Eight Stories”; see also pp. 114 and 117 of John Gunn’s *Schat-Chen*, featuring hand drawings of the Laguna version(s) of this figure, the katsina brothers Kopot and Ko-kah-ki-eh. A facsimile of Gunn’s story “Ko-pot Ka-nat,” including these drawings, appears in *SAIL* 5.1 (Spring 1993): 25-30.

<sup>4</sup>Linda Danielson identifies six such sources acknowledged by name in *Storyteller* alone in “The Storytellers in *Storyteller*” 22.

<sup>5</sup>On Silko’s use of Wyman’s account of the Red Antway, see Robert Bell, “Circular Design in *Ceremony*”; on her use of Boas’s Pacayanyi and Hummingbird Man stories, see Nelson, “Rewriting Ethnography.” Edith Swan, in “Healing Via the Sunwise Cycle,” argues that most of the embedded passages dealing with “unraveling” the effects of Coyote medicine derive from Fr. Berard Haile’s *Legend of the Ghostway Ritual in the Male Branch of Shootingway* (St. Michaels AZ: St. Michaels Press, 1950).

<sup>6</sup>Additionally, in her 1920 *Notes on Ceremonialism at Laguna*, Parsons includes, in her list of about a dozen Laguna “gods” included in the generic term *kupishtaiya* (a category that includes, incidentally, “Shiwanna”: see below), the figure Kopot<sup>e</sup>, one of “two brothers who became two stars close together and of which one is very red . . . Both brothers are very wicked” (95). Parsons’ account tallies closely with Gunn’s account of the brothers Kopot in *Schat-chen*.

<sup>7</sup>See Nelson, “He Said/She Said.”

<sup>8</sup>For some examples of this correspondence see Appendix A to this essay.

<sup>9</sup>See, for instance, Kroeber, “An Introduction” (3) and Wiget, *Native American Literature* (2-3).

<sup>10</sup>Kenneth Roemer provides a methodical study of these and other grounds of the novel’s canonization in “Silko’s Arroyos as Mainstream.”

<sup>11</sup>On the crucial implications of the backbone metaphor, see Nelson, “Rewriting Ethnography”; Swan also touches on the traditional Keresan significance of this trope in “Healing Via the Sunwise Cycle” (16).

<sup>12</sup>Boas 76, 283-84; Swan, “Laguna Symbolic Geography” 231-32. Boas spells the word “shiwana,” Parsons “shiwanna,” and Kurath “šíwana” (Keresan) and “shiwana” (English).

<sup>13</sup>This is, incidentally, also the “diaphanous morning cloud” that is the locus of the narrative perspective in Simon Ortiz’s beautiful early poem “Heyaashi Guutah.” This essay adopts Ortiz’s orthography; Boas gives the word as “Hi´tcats’e” (284), Kurath as “héaši.”

<sup>14</sup>I realize that here I’m paving the road to an argument about how each of the pretexts in this novel functions as a template for all of the prose narrative. I hope to draw out the implications of that argument in some future essay.

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## ***Salvage Ethnography and Gender Politics in Two Old Women: Velma Wallis's Retelling of a Gwich'in Oral Story***

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Rachel Ramsey

Almost any course in Native American literature will spend a large portion of its time exploring the processes by which much of this literature has become available for study. For example, oral stories from many cultures are unavailable in their original form for a variety of reasons and are accessible through translation only, provoking questions about the authenticity of the narrative, the motives and accuracy of the translator and translation, and the effectiveness of the textualized form. Many of the answers to these questions are based on how Native American literature is contextualized and that means relying on, for the most part, ethnographic research that may be faulty in its reasoning or ethnocentric in its conclusions. These issues increasingly play a role in the modern collection and production of Native literature, forcing critics and readers alike to engage the issues of accuracy, authorship, and ethnographic function.

Native Americans who are attempting to document their own culture and stories before they are no longer accessible for successive generations are forced into becoming not only authors but salvage ethnographers, and with this distinction, they also must bear the accompanying burden, responsibilities, and liabilities of the ethnographer. Velma Wallis, a Gwich'in who lives in the Yukon valley of Alaska, which her people have occupied for over a thousand years, personifies the conflict inherent in the dual roles of author/ethnographer. Wallis comes to the publishing world not only as a first-time author, but because of the nature of her story, which is based on a Gwich'in oral story that deals, on the surface, with the issues of elderly abandonment and tribal survival, as an ethnographer as



well. This distinction makes Wallis and her book particularly interesting and problematic because, together, they articulate an evolution taking place in the world of Native American writing, history, and authorship.

After several years of peddling her manuscript to Native American presses, in 1993 Wallis found a publisher for her creative retelling of the Gwich'in oral story she entitled *Two Old Women*. She not only received rejections from Native American presses but was also the focus of criticism after the publication of her book (McDaniel JH). Wallis's status as an author/ethnographer and the ethnographic evidence that can be extrapolated from her book, as well as the controversy surrounding it, calls into question not only the authenticity of former and present ethnographic evidence about the Gwich'in people, but also the reliability or the expectations of a Native author functioning as an ethnographer today. A close reading of Wallis's textualization of this oral story that concentrates on how she may deviate from the accepted ethnographic evidence concerning the historical and established pattern of gender roles and power divisions among the Gwich'in people may help to reach conclusions or establish some groundwork on how native writers, in particular, work as ethnographers and how the subtext of their work may challenge both the historical record and the present beliefs of their fellow Native Americans, evoking, sometimes, the disapproval of both Native American governments and presses. Before this examination may take place, though, it is necessary to supply some background information about the Gwich'in culture, to define and clarify the position of Wallis among the Gwich'in people, and to delineate the circumstances surrounding *Two Old Women's* publication.

The Gwich'in are one of several Athapaskan Indian peoples who inhabit the interior of northern Alaska, ranging from the headwaters of the Yukon river on the east to the Kobuk river on the west, and from the Alaska Range on the south to the Brooks Range on the north. Most recently, with the passage of the 1971 Native Claims Settlement Act in which the Gwich'in people chose not to participate, their land holdings consisted of a Delaware-size reservation (1.8 million acres) extending south from the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge where the Yukon and Porcupine rivers meet. Because of the nomadic history of the Gwich'in, they are referred to as a people rather than a tribe, unlike many other Native Americans of the lower 48 states. This can be attributed to the fact that a certain fluidity existed among the bands of people who roamed present day Alaska in loosely formed hunting parties (Simeone 16). They can be called a nation not only because they share one of the most cohesive of all Alaska

Athapaskan language systems but because of their modern-day political organization (Simeone 2).

The political organization of the Gwich'in people is a relatively recent (within the last 50 years) development, as is the actual name Gwich'in—a fairly new orthography in Western languages. To anthropologists, the Gwich'in were known as the Kutchin or Loucheux, a variegated mix of some 7,000 Athapaskan peoples whose home country centered around the Yukon territory; the Gwich'in people themselves, of course, have called themselves by either this term or by Na-Dene, meaning The People (Vanstone 4). They are believed to have been one of the first wave of people to migrate across the Bering Strait to settle parts of North America and disperse into the lower southern sections of the present day United States, contributing to the Native American tribes of the Apache and Navajo (Vanstone 18). The migration across the Bering Strait theory is still contested, but estimates place the Alaskan Athapaskan people as having hunted and lived there for at least 2,500 years (Reynolds 44).

Velma Wallis was born and lives in a Gwich'in village situated on the banks of the Yukon and Porcupine rivers in Fort Yukon, Alaska. As many of the Gwich'in families do, she and her family relied heavily on what anthropologists and ethnographers term subsistence living; in other words, they lived off the land, hunting moose or caribou and fishing in the salmon-laden rivers. Though Alaska may have once been considered the last frontier, the effects of alcoholism, welfare, and government regulations that seem to come hand-and-hand with Western contact have reached and affected Wallis's small Gwich'in settlement. Her father died of diabetes aggravated by alcoholism, and her mother surrendered to alcohol some years later, but not before she had passed on to Wallis and her younger siblings her stories of the Gwich'in past. Wallis herself dropped out of school to help her mother raise the younger children and eventually moved 20 miles outside of town to her father's hunting cabin, which had no electricity and plumbing (McDaniel JH). Wallis's self-imposed exile from the community and her living habits will beg closer examination as her role as ethnographer/author comes under scrutiny.

Wallis worked on and off again for ten years on *Two Old Women*, which is based on one of the stories her mother told to her as a child, and one that also has been told and heard in Gwich'in villages along the Yukon for many years (Hunt). The tale, as Wallis has written it, focuses on a time before Western contact when The People roamed in the winters looking for food; the tale chronicles harsh winters of scant food and subsistence living. In her version, two old women, Ch'idzigaak, who is 80, and Sa,

who is 75, are left behind as the group decides that they require too much food, time, and energy to maintain. Wallis tells how the women did not wait to die, but instead struggled to survive the arctic conditions and not only lived but managed to feed, clothe, and house themselves. An eventual negotiated reconciliation takes place between the people and the elders, and also between Ch'idzgyaak and her daughter and grandson who allowed her to be abandoned.

Writing her story over and over, and eventually typing a manuscript on a borrowed computer, Wallis attempted to gain the support of the Native officials and presses to publish her book. Somewhat surprisingly, at least for a Western reader, this tale of familial and communal reunion and Jack London-like adventure featuring two strong female leads was met with almost universal rejection and with scandalized reproaches for "the euphemistically stated way [Wallis] portrayed the Gwich'in people" (Murray, John 2). Her presentation of the Gwich'in oral story was not only rejected for financial and artistic support, but other Native presses in the Alaska area, including that of the Inupiat people who occupy land on the other side of the Arctic Refuge, wished to have no involvement with a book that addressed such "taboo" topics and situations.

Publication would eventually come through the support of a non-Native press, Epicenter Press, started and supported by Lael Morgan, a University of Alaska journalism professor. Even after the acceptance of the manuscript, Epicenter Press's applications for support to Native Associations were stonewalled. Morgan argues that the Native presses' reactions to Wallis's manuscript stem from the fact that "they [Native American Associations] felt that the subject of abandonment and other areas were too sensitive to warrant their support" (Beach). On the other hand, the reaction from readers to the publication of Wallis's book was phenomenal, with Epicenter selling 41,000 hardbound copies, and Harper Collins, who bought the paperback rights, selling 350,000 to date; plus, it was a top seller in Germany, Japan, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. In contrast, Wallis's own community, whose reactions were for the most part represented by Gwich'in officials, expressed sentiments that they felt "betrayed" and "angry" with Wallis (McDaniel J3).

*The Anchorage Daily News* writes:

In presenting one of her tribe's ancient stories to foreigners, Wallis has opened a cultural door new even to many Alaskans. But she is discovering not everyone wants visitors. Selling your stories is kind of like selling your heritage to another nation. Even one interviewee

who worked extensively for the Alaska Native Language Center in Fairbanks preserving Gwich'in stories expressed her opposition to Wallis's book. (McDaniel J3)

Though Native American censorship is not a new concept, Wallis's book seems to have garnered more than its share of criticism.

Most of the criticism was couched in phrases such as: "Wallis is writing about a taboo subject"; "her book make[s] Gwich'ins look bad," and she addresses a "sensitive area" (Hunt N15). As one can easily see, the objections and actions—if not to suppress Wallis's book, then to hamper its publication—are not clearly articulated, specific, or coherent but consistently and somewhat vaguely refer to its offensive nature, skirting around the edges of complaint. The most explicitly stated objection, in print, comes from Will Mayo, president of Tanana Chiefs Conference, a non-profit organization representing Interior Indians. He remembers Lael Morgan giving him a copy of Wallis's manuscript and states that "he recalls his reaction as being negative and he wondered about the accuracy of its characterization" (McDaniel J3). Mayo's statement foregrounds the unstated complaint fueling most of the criticism of Wallis's work with his emphasis on "accuracy" and "characterization." Wallis's story was not considered fiction or an "interpretation" of an oral story but as a cultural document or ethnographic evidence. As Mayo's comment makes clear, if fiction is seen to serve these functions, then it must be subject to the stringent measurements of accuracy and representational politics placed on historical and ethnographic research and writing.

Before exploring this further, it is important to place what Wallis is doing and the reaction that it is eliciting in a context of the oral story as ethnographic evidence. David Murray in *Forked Tongues* provides some valuable tools that can be used to orient our way of viewing Wallis's narrative as ethnography. Murray writes,

The rhetorical approaches to history of Hayden White, and a series of critical approaches to anthropology have shown the usefulness of treating factual writing as writing and subjecting it to the same sort of rhetorical analysis as fiction, and we should by now be fully aware of the problems involved in claiming to represent another culture or time. (2)

Murray is directing, in once sense, this statement toward a Western-centered audience who may be attempting to come to conclusions not only

about Native American fiction but about mainly white, European anthropological and ethnographic “factual” writings. With Wallis, a Native American who is writing both a fictional and factual narrative, the critical reader must examine what Murray is calling for in Western critics and ask if the same careful scrutiny must apply to Native writers. If Wallis is, in a sense, taking on the role of “ethnographer” for her own people, then it appears that her work should be subject to the evaluative principles that David Murray suggests we apply to Westernized ethnographers. This, in turn, leads to the complex question of whether a “textualized oral story” should be taken as history or sociology.

Julie Cruikshank addresses this complicated issue and has produced much of the literature available on oral stories of the Alaskan Athapaskan people. She asserts that “it is no longer a question of whether oral tradition includes historical knowledge, but [of] how much is present, how long a time span it covers, and how valid it is” (qtd. in Moodie 149). Her observation may help dispel the clouds surrounding the objections to Wallis’s work and help us formulate a series of important questions we must ask: Does Wallis provide an accurate portrayal or version of this traditional Gwich’in oral story? And should she, as an Native author, be held to the same principles as an ethnographer? The answer seems to be that oral stories do act as history and sociology and therefore must be examined as ethnographic evidence.

If, as David Murray argues, “to argue for the power of cultural and ideological assumptions and our capacity to project our needs and fears on to our representations of others need not be in itself to deny the existence of the others, or the political realities of our relationship with them” (3), then one must make the decision of who constitutes the other: Western ethnographers or/and native people, or both? If Murray believes that anthropological and ethnographic evidence about Indian cultures can be used not only to judge their accuracy, *per se*, but to reveal what they say about white ideological investments, then one could argue that how a Native American chooses to “present,” or in this case, “gender” an oral tradition reveals something about both the “ideological investments” of the author and his/her community. The comparison between Wallis’s depiction of gender and power relations within the Gwich’in community, and that depiction’s validity and accuracy compared to or opposed to the evidence gathered by Western ethnographers, can be extracted to support to this statement.

The Athapaskan Indians and the Gwich’in people in particular have only recently started to come under ethnographic scrutiny, largely be-

cause Western contact in the Yukon valley did not occur until the mid-eighteenth century and no regular pattern of contact was established until well into the nineteenth century with the discovery of gold and, later, oil. A combination of Russian and American fur traders established trading posts in the Yukon, most notably the Hudson Bay Company, and regular and sustained contact and influence was limited to these traders and missionaries. Ethnographic interest and action began to occur on the tails of these explorations, and current documentation is still taking place in hopes of “securing” the details and history of a disappearing culture (Vanstone 65). The evidence that does exist documenting the social structures and roles assigned within the Gwich’in community is somewhat limited, but most of the ethnographic evidence appears to be in agreement in its estimation of both pre-contact structure and post-contact evolutions within Gwich’in society.

One of the main objections to ethnographic writing has been its consistent pattern of representing totalities and generalizing traits and applying them to a culture as a whole (Krupat 7). With this warning in mind, the evidence, scant though it is, about the Gwich’in people seems to try to present whole pictures, but it also makes room for variations, individual and unique roles, and undetected social patterns. Most of the anthropologists working with Canadian and Alaskan Natives start with the overarching traits that connect the Athapaskan language families and then work to unearth the separate and distinctive aspects of individual groups of people.

In agreement with others, Joan Helm points out that “decisions about hunting groups are made by males. This is not to say that women lacked influence in these decisions but that their role is primarily one of influencing the decisions of men rather than making them themselves” (qtd. in Rushforth 95). These scholars raise the point that power is not distributed evenly along gender lines, but the issue is somewhat more complicated than this dualistic paradigm suggests. According to James Vanstone, the Gwich’in people fall into a category that he coins as “restricted wanderers,” meaning groups of people who continually moved from one hunting or fishing location to another, and who often could not make provisions for those who were unable to keep pace. This leads to one facet of Wallis’s book that would appear, validly, to arouse unease in Gwich’in readers—the abandonment of the elderly. Wallis’s depiction of this occurrence that undoubtedly happened among the Gwich’in, Athapaskan, and Inupiat cultures could easily be viewed as the reason for the Gwich’in people’s objections and unease with Wallis’s narrative.

What throws this assumption into some doubt is the fact that none of the people who go on record with their objections name, in any specific way, the abandonment issue. Though this issue is one that can be naturally viewed as “taboo” or “sensitive,” it does not seem to be the sole aspect of Wallis’s book that disturbs the Gwich’in leaders. The text doesn’t support the concept of this as the “sole” objection either; in fact, the tale concludes with the bond that develops between the people and the two old women. The chief decides to return to the area where the two old women were abandoned, announcing that “they had inflicted an injustice on themselves and the two old women, and he knew that The People had suffered” (98). Later the chief sends out scouts to check for signs of the two women, after concluding that the relationship of the generations was one in which “they had been trained from childhood to respect their elders, but sometimes they thought they knew more than the older ones” (99). The tale, for all intents and purposes, celebrates the rekindled relationship that is forged between the two old women and The People. The tale ends with words reminiscent of Western fairy tales or medieval morality plays:

More hard times were to follow, for in the cold land of the North it could be no other way, but The People kept their promise. They never again abandoned any elder. They had learned a lesson taught by two whom they came to love and care for until each died a truly happy old woman. (136)

It is important to illustrate that though one could see why elderly abandonment may provoke unease, Wallis has crafted a tale that appears to highlight the tradition the Gwich’in have of not abandoning their elders, but of conscientiously respecting and protecting them. This foregrounds the issue in the tale that works openly in opposition to ethnographic and current social patterns of the Gwich’in people—the issue of gender and power distribution.

As stated previously, the Gwich’in, as restricted wanderers and hunters, had a more flexible leadership model. Scott Rushforth asserts that “informal” leadership is an essential element of the social structure of the Loucheux or Gwich’in people, and he emphasizes the fact that a large portion of the leadership was by means of influence rather than birth or election (17). Because the Gwich’in people relied on a subsistence existence, labor was divided along gender lines with men acting as hunters and women as planters, fishers, and sewers (Vanstone 53). The leader of the

tribe would be chosen from among the most successful or influential hunters, or in other words, the leader was almost always male. Vanstone goes so far as to establish that:

All the adult males attempted to achieve a consensus when policies were to be made. Bands as well as smaller groupings often had leaders who attained prestige and influence through a demonstration of their superior abilities as hunters and providers. Such a leadership rested entirely on the force of an individual's personality and his ability to demonstrate his skill at locating and killing game animals. (48)

Again, though not testing or questioning Vanstone's assumptions, they seem to be accurately reflected by Wallis's own depiction of the chief in *Two Old Women*. He is described as a man "who stood almost a head taller than the other men," and he is the one to announce to The People the decision to leave Sa' and Ch'idzigaak. The words he uses also confirm Vanstone's notion of a "collective decision-making body"; he stresses that "the council and [he] have arrived at a decision" (5). What is also made clear is the relatively tenuous hold the chief may have over this roaming band, because "men became angered easily, and one wrong thing said or done could cause an uproar and make matters worse" (6). Wallis conveys to the reader the idea that the chief's hold on the people is incomplete and that he forces his decision upon them and the two old women because he, in part, has failed to fulfill his duty to track the caribou and provide food.

Along these lines, evidence culled from both older and newer anthropological and ethnographic studies finds corroborating support in Wallis's depiction of social structures in her rendering of this Gwich'in oral story. The concept of leadership placed in the hands of a male hunter finds reinforcement, but Wallis further provides the reader with a glimpse into the family structure with her characterization of Ch'idzigaak, who has a daughter and grandson. With their introduction, one can begin to see where Wallis provides details that ethnographic researchers either may not have had access to, or could only document through the stories of the Gwich'in people themselves, or that possibly did not even exist at the time for ethnographers to document.

Many of the characters in *Two Old Women* are left nameless or defined by occupation or through their relationships. Though Ch'idzigaak's daughter and grandson play a small role at the beginning and end of the



tale, Wallis spends several pages describing the grandson, naming him Shruh Zhuu. The third person narrator tells the reader that “while other boys competed for their manhood hunting and wrestling, this one was content to help provide for his mother and the two old women” (9). One would probably not take notice of this, but Wallis goes on to address the issue of how “his behavior seemed to be outside of the structure of the band’s organization handed down from generation to generation” (9). It is as if Wallis is admitting, not only by the similarities between her story and the ethnographic writings but by the reference to customs being handed down, generation to generation, that she is very aware of how the social organization “should” be arranged. Her decision to characterize the grandson very early in the tale as stepping outside that decreed social organization only prepares the reader for further instances where Wallis creates a version of an oral story that may be challenging socially prescribed and socially accepted roles.

Sa’ and Ch’idzigaak are left behind by the tribe because, with provisions scarce and the long winter yet to go, The People cannot afford the time, effort, and supplies required to support them. Left simply at that, one would think that the abandonment decision was a matter of picking the two eldest and weakest members of the tribe to leave behind. Though they are the oldest members of the group, Wallis introduces the guide, who locates them at the end of the tale, Daagoo, who is an “old man, younger than the two old women, but still considered an elder” and a tracker, even though the years “had dimmed his vision and skills” (96). Once more, this additional information suggests that his role provides evidence of Wallis’s subtext. Though unspoken, the point remains clear that Daagoo does not fear that this same fate will happen to him, although he is obviously losing his usefulness to The People. Marking this distinction seems necessary because it directly contradicts what most, if not all, the ethnographers state about the practice of abandonment among the Alaskan Athapaskan people.

Vanstone discusses this harsh, but evidently provident practice, stressing that “an early historical source estimated that one half of the elderly of the Kutchin, Tanana, and Beaver of both sexes perished in this manner” (83). Cruikshank also broaches this topic, gathering information that indicated, like Vanstone, that the practice of abandonment was not limited to one sex. These observations are drawn from the anthropological and ethnographic record, which for the most part is based on information gathered in the last 100 to 150 years from Gwich’in leaders who have been almost exclusively male. Cruikshank is currently beginning to focus her

studies on the stories and evidence that can be gathered from the elderly women along the Yukon river, and some of her observations will come into play later in relation to Wallis's tale.

Wallis's decision to center this particular rendition of this oral story around two old women seems significant. Lael Morgan, Wallis's editor, when first told about the story responded, "I had heard this story a half-dozen times, in every Athapaskan village I ever visited" (Pagano IF), while Eliza Jones, an Athapaskan linguist and storyteller from Koyukuk, adds, "the story of abandonment is a common one, sometimes the characters are young orphans" (McDaniel J5). Once it is established that different versions of the oral story exist, it is reasonable to come to the conclusion that the storyteller has either privileged or created one version in order to convey some meaning. Siobhan Senier looks at several versions of a Zuni oral story and deduces that "asking why the tale is gendered and relayed as it is leads to answers that speculate as to what kind of impulses this narration might be reinforcing or subverting" (223) or, in Wallis's case, creating. Wallis has clearly reinforced some of the ethnographic evidence previously published about the social divisions in Gwich'in culture, but she has also deliberately and systematically departed from or added to this evidence, especially about issues of abandonment and the somewhat non-traditional role played by Ch'idzgyaak's grandson. These deliberate departures urge the reader to look closely at her characterization of Sa' and Ch'idzgyaak.

The journey of the two old women begins as The People move away, leaving them with a small fire, a bundle of babiche, and a hatchet made of sharpened animal bones, a gift from Shruh Zhuu. With these things, the two women set out on an adventure of survival. As Sa' and Ch'idzgyaak begin their journey to find food and build a shelter, Wallis begins to trace out each woman's history, filling the image of "the old women" with a history of their lives and their roles in this group of nomads. The first hint she gives the reader that these women are more than they first appear is the description of the first kill that they make.

After the first cold day of traveling, Sa' sees a squirrel and, aiming her hatchet, "she ended the small animal's life in one calculating throw with skill and hunting knowledge that she had not used in many seasons." Sa' recalls, "Many times I have done that, but never did I think I would do it again" (21). Until now, the women were seen only in the capacity of sewers or carriers among The People, and this coincides with what the ethnographic evidence suggest women's roles were like. With this in mind, one sees how Wallis develops these unique insights into the role

women may have played in the Gwich'in past, often refuting what historical and sociological studies indicate. As the friendship between the two old women grows, Wallis reveals more of their past history. What becomes explicated in Sa's and Ch'idzigyaak's friendship is the story of the past and how they seem to share a common history—one of exceptional-ity and subsequent marginalization.

Sa' begins to tell her story first, confiding that "when [she] was young, [she] was like a boy," and was always with her brothers, learning to hunt, trap and skin caribou, rabbits, and salmon (59). These are the skills that allow Ch'idzigyaak and her to flourish and survive their abandonment during the harsh winter, but they are the very attributes that caused Sa' to become isolated from her family and the original band of people with whom she traveled. She goes on to talk of how her mother allowed her to do these things with the warning that "I would have to know when I became a woman, how to sit still and sew" (59). Sa's background becomes even more unusual once she explains that "when my mother asked me if I had become a woman yet, I did not understand. I thought she meant in age, not in that way" (60). With this, Wallis opens up possibilities that illustrate why the two women, Sa' in particular, may have been chosen to be left behind.

Julie Cruikshank's most recent research, which focuses on interviews with older women of the Gwich'in people and surrounding groups along Alaska's Yukon river, may help interpret Sa's history. The Gwich'in, as well as some other Native American groups in Alaska and the lower 48 states, have a shared custom of isolating young girls once menstruation begins. Cruikshank in the late 1980s interviewed older women who remembered when these practices still occurred. They spoke of having to wear a hood because their "look or gaze" was considered harmful, of not eating fresh meat, and of not coming into contact with men (*Athapaskan Women* 35). It seems probable and even likely that Wallis would be aware of these customs, and her decision to have Sa' not realize traditional markers of womanhood in a "natural" way distinguishes and separates her from a traditional female role. Sa' remembers that "summer after summer [her mother] would ask [her] the same question, and each time she looked more worried . . . [G]irls younger than me already were with child and man" (60). Sa' is not assuming the traditional role held by women either biologically or socially; she follows the paths of her father and brothers rather than her mother. The reader learns that Sa' hunted and worked to provide food rather than marrying and having children. Her success at these skills allowed her to challenge the decisions of the male

chief of her original people, and this chief decided to leave her behind one harsh winter. The act of abandonment in Wallis's tale is not a new one nor is it confined to the elderly.

Available ethnographic information describes how chiefs were chosen because of their superior hunting skills and their ability to influence others; however, the leader's role was often easily changed, highlighting the threat Sa as a good hunter and provider may have posed to male authority. Sa' eventually is found by a man in the woods who becomes her husband, but the fact that they never have children still leaves Sa's traditional "womanhood" in doubt. Wallis's selected historical narrative supplies a provocative subtext to this oral narrative, challenging culturally accepted and ethnographically researched views of gender and leadership.

Ch'idzigiyaak's story is similar to Sa's in that she, too, did not wish to take a man for a husband, but tells Sa': "You were luckier than I, for when it became apparent that I was not interested in taking a man, I was forced to live with a man much older than me" (66). Sa's reply to her is equally noteworthy: "Now here we are, truly old. I hear our bones creaking, and we are left behind to fend for ourselves" (66). Both Sa' and Ch'idzigiyaak have been characterized as "different" or "other" in the eyes of the tribe since their younger years, and their abandonment, the second for Sa', seemed inevitable. Wallis has consistently shown herself conversant with social organizational practices of her people in the past and appears to inject, deliberately, the story of two women outside the norm of that social group into her retelling of this traditional tale.

Critics like Paula Gunn Allen often attempt to find the repressed "gynocratic" or "female empowered" readings of Native American texts or oral stories, in which they uncover evidence that Native tribes originally had a gynocratic political system; patriarchal forms of leadership and government are products of Western ideology and interaction (Senior 225). Wallis's story does not seem to be striving particularly to uncover a past history of female power, but instead she seems to be creating a "historical" narrative in which females who did not fulfill a "normal" and "accepted" role were perceived as threatening and thus were abandoned or contained in some way. The eventual reconciliation between the elders and The People works to reinforce this viewpoint and emphasize how women may have possessed power without in effect being designated as "the chief."

Sa' and Ch'idzigiyaak, once they are abandoned by The People, are more than adequately able to feed and keep themselves warm. In fact, one

can even go so far as to say they flourish, catching “ten muskrats and more than their share of beaver and caribou” (79). The women have a large cache of dried meat and have sewn many hats, mittens and vests from rabbit fur while The People are described as “in a desperate state, their eyes and cheeks sunk low in gaunt faces and their tattered clothing barely able to keep out the freezing cold” (93). Their reunion with the two old women saves them from starvation. The women renegotiate with Daagoo and the scouts to help supply The People with food and clothing, and, though the two have not completely regained their trust of The People, they are surprised to find pledges of support from Daagoo and the younger scouts. Daagoo pledges, “I will protect you with my own life as long as I live”; adding to his support, one of the young guides states, “I too, will protect you if anyone ever tries to do you harm again” (116).

With the concept of Gwich’in leadership still in mind, it appears as if Sa’ and Ch’idzigyaak have proven themselves the better leaders, the better providers, and should have assumed leadership of The People. Wallis does not go so far as to say that the women become the recognized and designated leaders of the tribe, but instead she keeps the chief in a power position with the understanding that he, too, will protect the old women. His position may in one reading seem a nominal one because The People’s survival depended and continues to depend on the knowledge and skill of these two unconventional old women. Indeed, the final scene between the chief and the old women has him “nodding his head almost humbly” (126). The two women eventually rejoin The People and are appointed to “honorary positions” within the band.

Wallis’s exploration of female power, then, appears to question concepts of authority based on gender, challenging the traditional male/female roles. The exploration of these themes, though, is undercut by the containment of the threat posed by the two old women, in a Greenblattian way, by the title of “honorary position” rather than by the title they should rightly hold of “chief.” Cruikshank admits that:

There is some ambiguity about the relationship of women to power in traditional and more recent times. Certainly the range of taboos separating women from animals, the sources of power, for much of their lives, suggests this wish to contain or limit female power. (34)

Wallis’s tale embodies this gendered conflict of power and her retelling of this Gwich’in story provokes questions of why these women in particular were abandoned while hinting at the answers with the details of each

woman's unconventional past and non-conformist notion of womanhood. She ends her story with the two women as the salvation of the starving tribe, but notes that they do not wear the name chief that would seem to go hand and hand with their accomplishment.

The points that this close reading has brought to the forefront may then allow us return to the questions of Wallis's role as author/ethnographer and the Gwich'in people's negative reactions to her story. To begin with the more complex issue, Wallis as author/ethnographer, it seems appropriate to first define somewhat how the term "ethnographer" is used and how it applies specifically to Wallis. Arnold Krupat, whose work in Native American studies has led to a closer examination of our (Western) abilities and inabilities to look critically at Native American writings and cultures, somewhat loosely defines ethnohistory or ethnography as the examination of not only a culture and its people, but of the way that examination takes place and why it takes place (10). Wallis as a Native American author is producing documents about her people that speak for those people. Because of the rapid consumption of her product by Western readers and the lack of other information about the Gwich'in people, her work becomes a defining document about them. If one accepts that this is what Wallis's authoring of a Gwich'in oral story does, then one must turn to the other aspect of Krupat's definition which calls for an examination of why and how that ethnography is taking place.

Krupat, in addressing the relation of his ethnography to postmodern thought, states, "it has been far easier to call for a non-Western, Indian, biological, or postmodern ethnography and historiography than actually to produce them" (13). He argues that such paradigms as Gerald Vizenor's "trickster criticism" have limited efficacy because "apart from surface differences of style, tone, and organization, [it has] not offered interpretations very different from those of more traditional Western criticism" (14). What happens with this type of ethnography is that, in Calvin Martin's words, "the obvious distortion is the liquidation of the astounding intertribal diversity present at any one time in North America, as well as historical change within tribes, both before and after contact" (qtd. in Krupat 14). In contrast to these very apt statements, Wallis's work seems to come closer to presenting a version of a traditional Gwich'in tale that exposes the competing ideological structures at work within the Gwich'in culture.

As our close reading has indicated, Wallis has chosen, specifically, to challenge or reveal aspects about gender and power relations within the Gwich'in community by the elements she has, purposely it seems, included in her tale. What is known about Wallis's own life and history does

not, of course, answer why her tale was gendered in this way, but it does open a door for a certain amount of speculation that seems valuable. Her role in the Gwich'in community carries certain parallels with those of the two heroines of her tale, and these parallels grow stronger as one realizes that for years Wallis was called "naa'in," which means brush woman or "a person who moves outside of society's circle, peering in from the underbrush" (McDaniel J1). As stated earlier, Wallis helped her mother care for her siblings after her father died, moving to a hunting cabin 20 miles outside the Fort Yukon community. In this starkly furnished and remotely located cabin, she learned the skills even now held almost exclusively by men: hunting, fishing, and trapping. In an interview by phone with the *Cincinnati Post*, the interviewer comments, "[Wallis] had lived in a world of women and women's work. Now she had to learn men's work—hunting, trapping, fishing—to help her alcoholic mother feed and care for several younger children" (Conlan 8B). Wallis explains that this nickname was applied soon after she withdrew from society and took on the role of provider that was usually designated male. Interestingly, the name "naa'in," Wallis states, also was applied in the old days to those who were ostracized by the community or those people who lived by themselves "on the outskirts of Athapaskan society" (Holland 6). Wallis' own relationship with and among the Gwich'in people helps explain her attraction for the story of the two old women.

In her introduction, Wallis is careful to preface her story with the distinction that:

Sometime, too, stories told about one culture by someone from another way of life are misinterpreted. This is tragic. Once set down on paper, some stories are readily accepted as history, yet they may not be truthful . . . . Although I am writing it, using a little of my own creative imagination, this is, in fact, the story I was told and the point of the story remains the way Mom meant for me to hear it. (xiii)

As our earlier reading concluded, Wallis's tale helps support some of what Western anthropologists and ethnographers had glimpsed about Gwich'in society, but Wallis deliberately addresses, in the introduction, the idea that to accept stories readily as history carries the chance of misinterpretation. Cruikshank, Senier, and Murray seem to disagree, but the point may be not whether or not the oral stories reveal history—they do—but to analyze what type of history they reveal and accept it as an ideological history. Wallis may be seen as confirming this conclusion by maintaining

that the story's point remains the way her mother "meant" for her to hear it. Thus, Wallis both personalizes and objectifies the tale of the two old women, and it seems logical that the reader would do the same. One can see how Wallis's version of this tale reflects her own ideology, and as one newspaper critic has determined, "Her fascination with the legend of the two old women may reflect her relationship with her father, a man she calls a stern disciplinarian and a male chauvinist" (McDaniel J3). Though it may be easy to assume now that the elements dealing with gender politics were all parts of Wallis's own vision of Gwich'in society, the strong objections of the Gwich'in leaders to her tale suggest that this would not be a completely accurate statement.

The Native American presses' refusal to lend either financial or organizational support to Wallis's publishing attempts and the negative commentary that followed the book's publication are both very strong indicators that her narrative was more than an infraction against "selling tribal history." The reactions of the Gwich'in people to Wallis's telling of this legend reveal just as much of the community leaders' ideological perspectives as they do of Wallis's. Criticism of the published book seems to focus, though not publicly, on the way gender roles intersect with power positions within the narrative. The very public criticism of Wallis's lifestyle corroborates this; she lives what is considered a man's life of hunting and fishing, and she often left her one-year-old daughter in the care of the father while she traveled to Fairbanks and Alaska to conduct business related to her book. Though we can never know if Wallis's characterization of Sa' and Ch'idzigaak in her book represents "historical truths" about Gwich'in culture, her own treatment and experiences with Gwich'in culture seem to suggest that this conflict between gender and power is very much in evidence today.

Wallis's work contains what Murray and Krupat both see as a difficult but necessary component in the works of both authors and ethnographers: she represents her culture in a non-totalizing way. Whether or not the readers of her work appreciate this distinction is another matter. Because so little widely read textual history exists about certain Native American cultures, the leaders of those cultures cannot help but see what is produced as totalizing. The fact that Wallis herself is an integral part of the Gwich'in community and that her writing is necessarily understood as totalizing by the very same members of that community illustrates the difficulties of achieving a sense of individuality in Native American writing. It also suggests that this problem may not become solvable until such a time that the sheer quantity and heterogeneity of voices of Native



American literature increase to reflect the diversity that is present within tribal communities. In the meantime, Native American authors who write fiction or even fact-based fiction will consistently butt against the wall of ethnography, and their work will consistently be seen as representing in a totalizing way what Native Americans are or were.

Unfortunately, this is both hampered and helped by Western and Native American presses who simultaneously wish to exploit Native-American writing, and, in the case of many Native American presses, control the production of it (Fitzgerald 13). The Western presses read into the narrative of *Two Old Women* the concepts and issues that most clearly reflected their own ideological structures; they emphasized the book's feminist stance. In one review, Wallis's book was referred to as the Native American *Thelma and Louise* (Pagano 1F). As the reviewer for the *Washington Post Book World* states, "people are receptive to the lessons of this book—to care for the elderly as American 'grays' to be resilient in hard times, to cherish nature, and to preserve cultures" (Murray, John 2). And finally, even the Native American and/or Gwich'in leaders were able to read into Wallis's book what they needed or wanted to find.

Wallis's book was published in 1993, won the Western States Book Award in the same year, and in the next two years, it continued to be a best seller in both hardback and paperback. Still, the Gwich'in leaders maintained a strict disapproval of the book, until quite recently. Several later interviews with Wallis and subsequent book reviews indicate that support for the book has grown within the Gwich'in community. This support illustrates, just as the lack of support did, the motivations or ideological perspective of Wallis's Gwich'in listeners or readers. In 1995 the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska, where the Gwich'in land holdings are located, was targeted by oil lobbyists for exploration. A large national campaign was activated to encourage congress to vote to repeal the ban against oil drilling in the refuge. The Gwich'in people are adamantly opposed to such action, as they feel certain that such industrialization would significantly hamper or even destroy the caribou herds that frequent that area and constitute the majority of their food supply (Miller 40). Suddenly, Gwich'in leaders have cashed in on the wide appeal of Wallis's book to publicize its "allegorical nature" (56). They are no longer worried about its "taboo" topics, but see instead its value as an allegory of "living off the land" and of "taking care of our environment" (Little 33). Though one would not criticize the motives behind such an appropriation, it does signify that Wallis, as a possible subversive element, has been contained, and her work aligned with the goal of the Gwich'in people. It has gone

from an individual work of ethnography to become a totalizing showpiece for the Gwich'in leaders.

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## ***“Captive Woman?”: The Rewriting of Pocahontas in Three Contemporary Native American Novels***

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Sandra Baringer

The Pocahontas story, in terms of a postcolonial critique, represents the marriage of the colonizer with the colonized. This story has played out not only in mainstream American fiction but also in the cultural production of real-life descendants of intermarriage among Euroamerican and indigenous people. For example, among contemporary writers such as N. Scott Momaday, Leslie Marmon Silko, Louise Erdrich, James Welch, Gerald Vizenor, and Paula Gunn Allen, many (though not all) are of mixed ancestry, and they are invariably erudite in both Native and Euroamerican intellectual traditions. Their work demonstrates the dynamism of cross-cultural literary production and is addressed to Native and non-Native audiences alike; the canon they are creating represents Pocahontas’s latter day legacy.

One result is the refiguring of Pocahontas in contemporary Native American writing in self-consciously ironic exercises in intertextuality, such as the following passage from David Seals’s *The Powwow Highway*:

Nobility lay heavily upon Bonnie Red Bird. It had been her destiny to be an Indian princess, and she had accepted her destiny. She had the immaculate auburn skin that made the Cheyenne among the most handsome of all the Plains Indians . . . Her raven-black waist-length hair glistened even in the dark; her figure was full without being immodest; her walk, her posture, her voice—they were all perfectly erect and dignified. She was, in short, beautiful.

Eight packs of cigarettes a day and more men than she could

remember did not change this. A healthy quantity of alcohol and drugs only added luster to her cheeks. Two children had made her abdomen flatter . . . (19)

This style of iconoclastic hyperbole has apparently been a little much for many readers, judging from the opening metafictional commentary of the sequel *Sweet Medicine*.<sup>1</sup> But it brings into focus the collection of stereotypes and contradictions that have arisen around depictions of the Indian woman as object of desire throughout the history of American literature since first contact. The evolution of this stereotype and the fascination that the woman of color has embodied for mainstream American writers have been well documented<sup>2</sup> but the primary focus herein will be on the constructions of selected Native American women characters by Native American writers: the protagonist's sister Kate in James Welch's *The Death of Jim Loney*, the aforementioned Bonnie Red Bird in *The Powwow Highway*, and Shawnee Ray Toose in Louise Erdrich's *The Bingo Palace*.

The historical Pocahontas was born around 1595. According to Captain John Smith's account, she saved him from execution by her father Powhatan, chief of the Powhatans, in 1607. In *Pocahontas's Daughters* Mary Dearborn argues that "when Pocahontas laid her head over John Smith's to prevent her father's men from clubbing him to death, she simultaneously defied Powhatan and rejected her own ethnic and familial identity" (72). As a literary interpretation of the incident, this assertion may support Dearborn's general thesis that "the story of Pocahontas's acquisition of an American or a non-ethnic identity is, for the ethnic woman, an important feature of the common language of America" (72), but the historical accuracy of Dearborn's interpretation is questionable. On the contrary, it seems more likely that Pocahontas was exercising her prerogative as daughter of a sachem to decide the fate of a captive than that she was rejecting her identity.<sup>3</sup> In thus performing the role of what Smith and his men would have defined as "princess," Pocahontas would have been reaffirming—not rejecting—her "ethnic and familial identity." This is an important distinction because the maintenance of an Indian identity is important to contemporary Native American writers, and the tensions and choices surrounding this issue are reflected in the characters in their fiction. The position of these writers on this issue is not the same as that of many of the European immigrant writers Dearborn discusses.

At any rate, five years after John Smith's release from captivity, Pocahontas became the captive when she was abducted by Captain Argall and detained in Jamestown, held for a ransom of several hundred bushels

of corn, which Powhatan was unable or unwilling to pay. After a year or so she converted to Christianity (in 1613). She married John Rolfe in 1614, bore his son Thomas in 1615, went to England in 1616, and died there of an infectious disease in 1617 at the age of 22 (Tilton 7-8, Sharpes 231-39).

Pocahontas's primary function in American mythology is maternal: she is everyone's Indian grandmother. So many people claim to be descended from Pocahontas that at least one book has been written to list them (Brown et al). Robert Tilton points to the irony of the fact that the white supremacist Virginia aristocracy derived their claim to aristocracy in large part from a claim to be descended from Pocahontas the Indian princess, facilitating the national fantasy that Tilton describes: "It had become clear by the second decade of the nineteenth century that Pocahontas had rescued Smith, and by implication all Anglo-Americans, so that they might carry on the destined work of becoming a great nation" (55). This notion had been communicated to the Delawares, Mohicans, and Munries by Thomas Jefferson in a letter advising them to throw down their bows and take up the plow: "You will mix with us by marriage, your blood will run in our veins, and will spread with us over this great island" (Scheick 39).<sup>4</sup> Thus originating with the first families of Virginia, the Pocahontas story has come to validate in the national psyche the presence by a mythical indigenous consent of Europeans in America, serving the same function as the Thanksgiving story of Squanto and the pilgrims. Pocahontas's Christianization, marriage, production of a biracial heir, and trip to "mother" England all further resonate with the needs of American immigrants and their descendants in constructing the melting-pot model of American history.

Not all Pocahontas figures in American literature focus on the maternal aspect, however. The need for an originary American "Mother" does not demand constant replication. Overall, the most salient characteristic of Pocahontas figures in literature is the offering of some sort of aid and assistance to a white man or a group of white people. Usually the Indian woman is desirable, possibly even sexually irresistible, and she often dies tragically, perhaps in a self-sacrificial act; this latter plot twist becomes even more prominent in the tragic mulatto branch of the myth. The noble savage dichotomy plays out as the exotic peacekeeper in contrast to the bloodthirsty savages, or as the beautiful princess in contrast to the homely squaw. The beauty and death factors have served primarily dramatic purposes in providing romantic impetus to a plot and promoting the myth of the vanishing Indian while generally avoiding the ultimate denouement of racial mixing that did not become a part of American mythmaking until

after the fact. The providing of some crucial service (beyond sexual service) to the white man is the characteristic most consistent with historical fact. In this respect, Molly Brant and Sacagawea—and the legends that have grown up around them—follow in Pocahontas's footsteps. But these later historical sagas and the romanticization of the Pocahontas story that reached its zenith in the 1995 release of the Disney blockbuster *Pocahontas* erase from the origin myth of American culture not only the tragic death of the original heroine from a foreign virus—in the terminology of postcolonial theory, death by cross-cultural contamination—but also the discomfiting circumstance of her captivity and “reprogramming” at Jamestown.

What are young Americans, those whose first contact with the Pocahontas narrative will be the Disney movie, to make of the marriage—actual and metaphorical—of the colonizer with the colonized in American history and American literature? In considering the ramifications of assimilation, the gendering of the colonized as female continues to resonate in contemporary Native American novels, but with significant divergence from the romanticized Pocahontas paradigm. Looking at some of these texts can provide an enhanced perspective.

If one expands the stereotype to encompass all “salvation of heroic white male figures by exotic women” as Tilton suggests (180), then one could probably construct an international catalog of Pocahontas figures in popular fiction. But Charles R. Larson asserted in 1978 that “we encounter no Pocahontas figures when we examine novels written by American Indian authors” (32-33), an assumption which Tilton and others seem to have adopted without further examination (Tilton 180). This assertion may have been true in 1978, especially if one adheres to a strict definition of her characteristics. It is easy to see why American Indian authors would have little interest in perpetuating “her mythic role in the success of Anglo-America” (180). But few scholars today follow the approach articulated by Jack Forbes that “Native American literature” is limited to that written “for primary dissemination to other persons of Native identity and/or culture.”<sup>5</sup> Clearly, one can look at raced female objects of desire in Native American literature and analyze them as reconfigurations of the Pocahontas narrative that Indian and mixedblood writers grew up with, as did anyone exposed to American popular culture. Sara Winnemucca's autobiography, *Life Among the Piutes* (1883), and Mourning Dove's *Cogewea* (1927) would be the first prominent examples.<sup>6</sup> Though probably no list can be comprehensive, one would have to include Paula Gunn Allen's *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows* (1983), Janet Hale's *The*

*Jailing of Cecelia Capture* (1985), Michael Dorris's *A Yellow Raft on Blue Water* (1987), Susan Power's *The Grass Dancer* (1994)<sup>7</sup> and other characters in the fiction of Scott Momaday, Leslie Marmon Silko, James Welch and Louise Erdrich to fully assess the influence of the Pocahontas narrative on depictions of young women in Native American fiction. This is not to say that every such character is a reconfiguration of Pocahontas, but that no writer, even on the remotest reservation, is untouched by the dominant narrative tropes of American culture. Indian writers "signify" on the Pocahontas myth, in the terminology of Henry Louis Gates, Jr. describing the African American literary practice of subversively playing on the language and motifs of a dominant culture.<sup>8</sup>

The first two novels discussed herein, *The Death of Jim Loney* and *The Powwow Highway*, have been selected as representative of two complementary constructions of young Indian womanhood by male writers writing in the late seventies. Even though Kate Loney and Bonnie Red Bird suffer neither death nor disfigurement in these respective novels, their situations are problematic in more subtle ways. The third novel, *Bingo Palace*, offers a woman writer's point of view, fifteen years later, that is substantially different and considerably more positive, deploying a strategy of destabilization of gender roles while at the same time recuperating the power of maternity in service of Indian rather than Euroamerican interests.

The tragic ending of *The Death of Jim Loney* has received a lot of critical attention. The novel explores at length the plight of the mixedblood protagonist with no mother and a no-good father, a drinking problem, and no clear idea of where he wants to be or what he wants to be doing. One critic has even asserted that:

In a small but highly significant way, Loney restores harmony to his people and sacrifices himself for them . . . (Since) the ultimate purpose of (Loney's) suicide is to achieve (social) integration, it is not an act of rebellion and spite against tribal society. Maybe the entire definition of suicide needs to be re-evaluated in the light of Native American practice? (Scholer 75)

In seeming to imply that suicide among Native American youth may be reclassified as a religious ceremony, this sort of reading makes the error of confusing tragedy with tragic heroism. The truth is that Jim Loney is not a tragic hero; his situation is tragic, but there is nothing very heroic about his behavior or his integrity. An athletic hero in high school, Loney



is still going to the high school games years after he graduated. But life after high school has followed a confusing downhill course for Loney. High school athletics are a way of life for many Indian youth in Montana, and so is lack of employment opportunity. This theme, similar to that in the film *Hoop Dreams*, is likewise pursued in Welch's *Indian Lawyer* and in much of Sherman Alexie's work. *The Death of Jim Loney* thus offers a realist contemporary description of Indian culture that resists romantic notions of authenticity.

But if the Jim Loney character runs the risk of reinforcing one of the more depressing stereotypes of Indian men, what can be said about the women characters in the novel? The depictions are similarly depressing, though the tragedy is more subtle. For example, Loney meets his girlfriend, the white teacher, at a ball game. Here, the white woman offers aid to the Indian man: an ironic reversal of the Pocahontas trope, but also a commentary on the history of the friend-of-the-Indian philanthropy and political activism of white women. Her aid, as well as his sister's, is ultimately rejected as Loney continues on his downward spiral, oblivious to his current emotional obligations in his grief over his mother's irresponsible abandonment of him.

Loney's older sister Kate occupies the larger-than-life Pocahontas position in this text: "six feet tall, lean and striking as a dark cat" (62), an object of desire to "the men in Washington and the men she met on the road" (65). But the novel focuses more on Kate's maternal inclinations than on her sexuality. As a girl she went away to boarding school, not because she was forced to, but because she didn't want to compete with her white, social worker stepmother for Loney's love after their father abandoned them. Kate works as a nationwide consultant to teachers on reservations. One critic asserts that her "domineering forthright personality is the antithesis of Jim's hesitancy" (Costa 161). Perhaps so; one could say that she has compensated for her sense of losing her younger brother to her stepmother by becoming big sister to the entire red nation.

Though Jim Loney stays in Montana, the road occupies a significant place in this text. As Pocahontas went to London, Kate has gone to Washington. But she sees herself as policymaker and advocate for reservation interests. She wears Indian art on her body and lives in a fashionable apartment in Georgetown with Indian art displayed on her walls. One of her paintings is of a fancydancer:

walking home alone along a highway, still in full regalia but lonely and tired . . . The painting had always inspired Kate. She felt that her

purpose was to create something for him to go home to . . . Now she wondered if that was true. She had been slowly and sadly heading toward the conclusion that it took quite an extraordinary person to make the attempt to rise above his life. Most were resigned to survival on that level of existence they were born to. (164-5)

Kate has just come back to Harlem, Montana to try to save her brother from himself. As she thinks of her brother, whom the educational system she serves has failed, the narrative positions her brother in opposition to white men who desire her:

she was happy and she felt her brother's eyes on her, and she knew that for a change a man, a young man, was watching her without a trace of desire or lust or whatever. He was simply watching her. She had become used to the men in Washington and the men she met on the road. Most of them were business associates in one way or another, but when the business was done and the inevitable cocktails flowed, they became randy and full of themselves. The men on the road were the worst. They seemed to think of her as a sex-starved gypsy and imagined they were there to satisfy her as no other man could. She had become an expert at recognizing that precise moment when the good fellowship ended and the lust began. And she knew that she was asking for it, not by innuendo or suggestion but by the nature of things, a woman in a man's world and so on and on. If you were the least bit attractive you became the object of their fuck game. And you became cynical. (65)

Later Loney asks her why she's never gotten married, and she says "I never met a man who could stand me" (91).

Kate resists the Pocahontas stereotype, but she has been written into it: an attractive Indian woman who is an object of uncontrollable lust to white men. Her role in relation to Indian men seems to be sisterly or maternal. Is she too domineering? She seems strong, but not any more overbearing than one would expect, in trying to get Jim to come to Georgetown with her. The road—the reversal of the east/west crossing—has led to success for her and for those who benefit from her cross-cultural educational projects. But even though her career focuses on Indian education, she is offering aid to the white man in terms of an anti-assimilationist view: a place for the fancy dancer in the picture "to go home to." Despite her seemingly hard line on this assimilation issue, her

status as a collaborator condemns her to celibacy: that is, she chooses celibacy over a relationship with a white man. In terms of the Pocahontas myth, it would be life-threatening for her to do otherwise. Pocahontas's marriage to a white man resulted in the voyage to London that condemned her to death through contamination by a European influenza virus. This connection of romantic capitulation with eventual martyrdom is borne out in American literary tradition.<sup>9</sup>

But to return to the quoted passage, should we read the text as implying that there is something wrong with men who can't "stand" Kate? If Welch is offering a critique of sexism, it is too glib: it reads, men can't stand successful women, who tend to be domineering. Loney's fear of going with the white teacher to Seattle bears the same implication. This theme, like the book as a whole, is a well-drawn exercise in stark realism, but it tends to cast the important women in Loney's life as "bad mothers": overbearing usurpers of the maternal role, lacking children of their own, whose assistance Loney somewhat inexplicably feels he must resist. Just as Jim Loney's tragic death should not be read as a noble sacrifice, so likewise Kate Loney's celibate advocacy in the white world for all the Indian children in its dominion cannot be read as a role model for Indian women.

David Seals is not a well-known writer; his first novel *The Powwow Highway* was written in the late seventies and made into a movie in 1986 that has received more critical attention than the book. *The Powwow Highway* is a literarily self-conscious conflation of the Kerouac-generated subgenre of the road trip with the Native American literary conventions of the vision quest and ceremony.<sup>10</sup> In popular culture, the road trip is usually fueled by substance abuse: Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, Edward Abbey's *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, the movie *Thelma and Louise*. This trope was pervasive in the popular music of the seventies and early eighties, too: "White Line Fever," "Willing" ("give me weed, whites and wine/ and I'll be willing to keep on moving") and approximately half the Bruce Springsteen oeuvre. In this vein Seals has produced an American road warrior tour de force, but in the process has offended many by his juxtaposition of the sacred and the profane.

The protagonist of *The Powwow Highway* is Philbert, a sort of nascent medicine man, though it is consistent with Seals' overall tone to note that a "filbert" is a kind of a nut, testimony to Philbert's somewhat goofy persona. Buddy Red Bird is an AIM warrior who frequently launches into political tirades. Together they take off from the Cheyenne reservation in Wyoming to rescue Buddy's sister Bonnie from jail in Sante Fe.

The passage quoted at length in the introductory section of this essay establishes Bonnie as the quintessential but self-conscious “Indian princess,” incorruptible by cigarettes, sex, alcohol, and innumerable other drugs. Overburdened with being the “superstructure of [Cheyenne] society” in her “devastating goodness,” Bonnie “knew that the duties of a modern princess lay in individual fulfillment”; she had to become “liberated” to be a “relevant symbol” so she went to New York at the age of seventeen and “attacked the masculine mystique” of the “white American male, the most privileged primate on earth” (20). Starting out with a job at a jewelry store, she “made money, accepted gifts, and maintained her pride throughout the foolish declarations of love by half a dozen men.” Then she falls in love with a Communist professor of economics at Columbia; they ride the cocktail party circuit as “a sociological triumph of the communal man and the tribal woman,” until he gets hit by a bus and dies on impact (21). She becomes a sixties radical and marries a member of the IRA. He beats her, as they have two children and live on welfare while he “directed Pawnee and Shawnee in existential plays about the deterioration of the Western myths” (23). They go West; she divorces him in Oklahoma City to get involved with a drug cartel: “if you can’t join one whiteman, then join another whiteman.” Since

she never could quite swallow the racism of the whiteman in the business world or the sexism of the whiteman in the society world or the boredom of the whiteman in the working-class world . . . she would fight them, as a traditionally proven way of joining them. Sell illegal drugs to get rich. Kill two birds with one rationalization. Belong to an underground that respected Indians. (26)

It works for awhile. “She made love to Mexicans, Texas cowboys, sailors in Mazatlan, surfers in Galveston, and even an Indian in Hermosillo.” She hooks up with a mob kingpin named Tony who’s trying to “crack the Indian market” (28). He fixes it up with a judge in Sante Fe for her to regain custody of her children, but this scenario attracts the attention of an FBI agent who has been following her; he plants a pound of marijuana in her car during the night and busts her while Tony is running an errand. She doesn’t do much during the rest of the novel but sit in jail and wait for Philbert and the kids to rescue her:

He eased up to the window.

“*Winu!*” he whispered. “Captive woman?”

“What?” the woman breathed. “It’s you?”  
“Ai, Whirlwind Dreamer, Nagi Napeyapi and Wotawe. But you can call me Philbert.” (281)

Though this convoluted subplot of Bonnie’s cross-cultural contamination is one of the more interesting aspects of the novel in terms of post-colonial discourse and the Pocahontas narrative, it is significantly sanitized and oversimplified in the movie plot (in which Bonnie is an innocent decoy used by the FBI to set up her brother the AIM activist).

Seals provides so much of his own literary commentary that one hesitates to second-guess it. He sets out to modernize the “Indian princess” as “superstructure,” but in the process of “liberating” her into a “relevant symbol” he puts her into the collaborative posture of Pocahontas. Going, in this case, to New York rather than London or Washington, Bonnie embarks on a sort of tour of the borderlands of white American maledom. Though the aid and assistance she provides is to the counterculture of the sixties and early seventies, it is still being provided to white males. Of course, since the entire text is an ironic tour de force, there is nothing inconsistent about the fact that Seals’s sexual “liberation” of the Indian princess operates in a sort of retrograde gender/race reversal so that she ends up as temporally and spatially displaced mirror image of Pocahontas: the damsel in distress of the white captivity narratives of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Instead of the pioneer woman going to the frontier, being captured by Indians and rescued by white men, the Indian woman goes east and gets captured by white men, eventually landing in an Old West jail in Albuquerque. Borrowing freely from the stock in trade of Hollywood’s Old West, Philbert ties a rope from the bars on the window to his spirit horse Protector (a 1964 Buick LeSabre) and pulls down the wall just like in the Hopalong Cassidy movie Bonnie’s son Sky saw on cable television (273).

Arnold Krupat has claimed that if irony is the central trope of modernism, catachresis is the specific figure of irony that constructs the postmodern self (212-1113, fn. 12).<sup>11</sup>

The figure of catachresis is one whose force is particularly difficult to convey. The OED defines it as “misuse with a sense of perversion” . . . from popular culture, a phrase such as “jumbo shrimp” (some would add “military intelligence”)—which might have more catachrestical than oxymoronic force. (87)

Seals is writing catechrestically—his manipulation of expectations about captives and Indian princesses is abusive and absurd in the sense that Krupat has described. The entire text, in fact, is a catalog of abusive and absurd usage of motifs from sacred Native American sites to such mainstream American artifacts as the drive-through window at a bank.<sup>12</sup> The concept of absurd usage is a useful one in considering the positioning of the postmodern subaltern writer as “different from” an indeterminate centrality. At the same time, catachresis is consistent with the concept of trickster discourse in Native American fiction as described by Gerald Vizenor<sup>13</sup>; of Vizenor’s own novel *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart*, Alan Velie has said that:

catachresis, the deliberate misuse of words or mixing of metaphors . . . is Vizenor’s way of winking at the reader and fighting the limits of language. He is aware that you can’t break out of the prisonhouse of language, but catachresis is his way of kicking at the walls. (136)

Seals’s and Welch’s novels, both copyrighted in 1979, offer complementary male views of Indian womanhood making terms with the dominant culture. Welch’s beautiful Indian woman gone to Washington is apparently doomed to celibacy by grim necessity, but otherwise successfully engaged in advocacy for Indian interests. Seals’s counterpart has embarked on a libidinal tour of the borderlands of white maledom, trying out the master’s tools. They are ultimately more than she can handle and she becomes “captive woman,” but Seals offers redemption for Bonnie Red Bird, aided by Hopalong Cassidy, in the implicit promise of a relationship with Philbert. Kate and Bonnie are compelling figures, but they do evoke, however mildly or ironically, the madonna/whore dichotomy endemic in European/American literary heritage in that Kate seems sexless and Bonnie seems oversexed.<sup>14</sup> This is not surprising; even accounts of the original Pocahontas exhibit a ribald, nervous tension over the supposed conflict between sacred matrimony (i.e. motherhood) and profane lust. John Rolfe wrote to a friend that Pocahontas evoked his “unbridled desire of carnal affection: but for the good of this plantation, for the honour of our countrie, for the glory of God . . .” etc. (Lincoln 172).<sup>15</sup> The colonial history of the sexual exploitation of women of color by white colonizers was mythically resolved in the marriage of Rolfe to Pocahontas and her subsequent role as grandmother of a Virginian dynasty. Welch’s and Seals’s Indian women resist this resolution by falling back into the original binary opposition.

One writer who has successfully avoided this pitfall is Louise Erdrich. *The Bingo Palace* is Erdrich's sequel to *Love Medicine*. The bingo palace contemplated by Lyman Lamartine and the tribal council provides a vehicle for authorial commentary on dynamics of reservation gambling enterprises in general. In another sense the novel is about the return to the reservation of the prodigal Lipsha Morrissey, the foundling found amongst the rushes and grown into hapless possessor of the healing touch in *Love Medicine*. Lipsha, having ventured into the mainstream society of Fargo, North Dakota, is (in this aspect of his situation) a male reinscription of the assimilation plot that has been so often figured in terms of the Pocahontas character: "going back and forth to the city weakened and confused him" (7). Though this Pocahontas trope is not the main theme of the novel and Erdrich may not even have had it specifically in mind, it warrants attention. The Pocahontas myth is so instantiated in the American symbolic that a demystification strategy is often required in order to identify certain aspects of the myth as such. In this instance, the perils of the journey to the white man's world have enfeebled Lipsha like the British strain of influenza that killed Pocahontas. Of course, the perils of travel are a standard literary device from the green world of medieval romance to the alien infections of outer space, but they have a particular resonance in terms of Native conflict between assimilation and maintenance of cultural integrity. The Pocahontas story informs a reading of the contacts of the characters in this novel with white culture, particularly as to Shawnee Ray Toose, but Lipsha's character as well is evocative of a reader response that resonates with the Pocahontas trope.

Lipsha's *androgynous* aspects in *The Bingo Palace* have been noted by Julie Barak's essay on gender mixing in a number of characters in Erdrich's novels, Lipsha being one of these liminal border crossing characters "whose strength comes from his special role in the community and from the ways he is 'mixed'" (60). But the focus of the novel soon shifts to Shawnee Ray. What drives the plot is Lipsha's efforts to alienate Shawnee Ray's affections from Lyman, Shawnee's putative fiance and father of their small son Redford.

One interesting aspect of this romance is that the reader, first and frequently, sees Shawnee through Lipsha's point of view. Only later in the novel does the narration occur through Shawnee's point of view. The reader is being sutured into the male gaze, but the male gaze is being constructed by a woman writer.<sup>16</sup> As the novel progresses, Lipsha, as foolish and worthless as he seems to himself and to Shawnee, nevertheless seems somehow to be fulfilling a female fantasy construction of how

a postmodern man should win a woman. “Only a man knows how a woman is supposed to act” (63) asserts the cross-dressing title figure in David Henry Hwang’s *M. Butterfly*, a play that explores some of the ramifications of androgynous role playing and colonialism in the course of rewriting the Asian Pocahontas (*Madame Butterfly*). Read with due irony, one could rewrite this assertion in different ways: only Lipsha knows how Shawnee is supposed to “act”—or, on the other hand, only a woman (Erdrich) knows how Lipsha is supposed to “act”—carried further, only a woman knows how a man is supposed to see a woman “acting.” There is a chain of “looking” at Shawnee Ray in this novel that is cognizant of the history of seeing Indian women through male eyes: John Smith’s and John Rolfe’s descriptions of Pocahontas, statues of Sacagawea pointing the way, dying Indian beauties in Hollywood westerns (*Broken Arrow*, *Little Big Man*, *Jeremiah Johnson*, *Thunderheart*). Male Indian writers are a part of this literary history as well, as I have attempted to show with Welch and Seals.

When Lipsha first “sees” Shawnee Ray in *Bingo Palace*, the scene is a winter powwow; the reader’s eye is focused through Lipsha’s as he draws attention to the lighting: “I follow the soft light of Albertine’s expression to where it catches the harder radiance of Shawnee Ray Toose, who takes that glow of my cousin’s and somehow beams it at me . . . “ and then to zoom and angle: “I step forward, to catch a better glimpse of them both, but my eyes somehow stay hooked to Shawnee Ray.” She is performing: wearing a jingle dress and carrying

the entire wing and shoulder of a big mother eagle. I *picture* her lifting off, snagging that bird midflight, and then neatly lopping it in half. You can *see* Shawnee Ray deep in the past, running down a buffalo on a little paint war-horse, or maybe on her own limber legs. You can *see* her felling the animal with one punch to the brain. Or standing bent-elbowed with a lance. You can *see* her throwing that spear without hesitation right through a cavalry man or a mastodon. Shawnee Ray, she is the best of our past, our present, our hope of a future. (12-13, emphasis added)

Moments later, she appears in duly fetishized closeup: “those steak-rare, ringing hips are suddenly before me, eye level, and I look up, over what the basket carries, into Shawnee’s downcast and commanding eyes” (21).<sup>17</sup> Though Lipsha’s cinematic eye has already broken her up into body parts, she stands over him. Does he feel her “looking” as castrating, maternal?



She is carrying the wing of a “mother” eagle—not only gendered, but maternal. Seen as past, present, and future, she becomes potential mother, wife, and daughter in Lipsha’s fantasies.

Those so inclined could revel in Freudian abandon with this passage, but it mainly serves to foreshadow the destabilization of gender roles. On this point Barak cites another part of this powwow scene, setting forth a litany of who Lipsha is not: “there was no place the boy could fit . . . He was not a tribal council honcho . . . not a little old Cree lady . . . not a fancy dancer . . . not a shawl girl . . .” and so on (9-10, qtd. in Barak 59-60). This gender bending later becomes explicit in the lovemaking passages. It also plays out in the rivalry between Lipsha and Lyman Lamartine. As Lipsha tells Shawnee later,

“with him, Lyman, sure, he points out your intelligence. But the effect is this: all you do is *about him*. What a good selection *he* made . . . With me, you’ll have to be about yourself. With me, you own who you are. In fact, you’ll have to be smarter, stronger, better, ‘cause my life ain’t gonna shine any light. My deeds won’t bounce down on you and give you a halo.”

“That’s for sure.” (111)

Lyman embodies a physically traditional model of masculinity: built like Sylvester Stallone, he has been seduced by American capitalism into becoming the reservation’s financial wheeler-dealer.<sup>18</sup> Lipsha, on the other hand, is slightly built with long hair. Erdrich constructs Lipsha as self-deprecating but dramatically persuasive without being overbearing. Sometimes the woman’s expectations are pretty minimal, as when he stands stripped practically naked, pleading eloquently for a second chance, and Shawnee responds “At least you wear socks” (110). Fashion conscious as Shawnee is, all she expects from her romantic hero is that he wear socks under his boots.

But if Lipsha’s masculinity is problematized in a positive way, one is led to expect a similar redefinition of Shawnee Ray’s femininity. As Lipsha says, she will have to be “smarter, stronger, better” not merely to live life with Lipsha, but more fundamentally to escape the somewhat suffocating trap laid for her by Lyman Lamartine in collusion with Shawnee Ray’s self-appointed foster mother, Zelda Kashpaw: a custody suit brought by Lyman over Shawnee Ray’s son Redford.

Shawnee Ray is a fashion designer and prizewinning powwow dancer who has six books of designs of “fashion with a Chippewa flair, as she

explains it" (67, 73). She is "enrolling in the university. 'In the arts, in the arts,' people say, with a rhythm in their voices that means although dubious at least there is a name to her future" (229). Thus, her career goals and artistic inclinations seem "feminine" enough, but her aspirations will require a fearsome degree of self-assertion. Lyman wants to "groom" her to be manager of the planned bingo palace (164). Moreover, he is willing to strong-arm her with the custody suit over his small son, with whom he usually has minimal and casual contact, to keep Shawnee from leaving the reservation. Thus, in order to achieve control over the direction of her life and make Pocahontas's trip to the white man's world, Shawnee has to transform herself into an intimidating wielder of psychological power. Sneering "like that tough lady in 'The Big Valley,'" she questions Lyman's paternity and challenges him to a paternity test. To Lipsha, who has just asked her to marry him, she says "'Get out of here! I won't marry either of you. Period. You . . .'" she looks down at me, her mouth twisting, 'you talk so big about your feelings and you can't even make it back to school.'" Lipsha narrates: "We can't understand, can't absorb, can't admit, and will not let that woman be her" (189).

Though Shawnee Ray appears in this passage as a much more fear-some "bad mother" than Jim Loney's women ever did, maternal power is an important and ultimately positive aspect of Shawnee Ray's position in the text. She is frightening to Lipsha—not to her son. Redford is clearly her first priority: she will not surrender him to the clutches of "apple" Indian Lyman and his ersatz palace of materialistic desire, no matter what the cost to herself. Read in the context of the Pocahontas paradigm, Shawnee Ray has mothered a son who, though genetically Indian, is the son of a white man's Indian father "contaminated" by Euroamerican attitudes toward wealth: the quintessentially assimilationist Indian tycoon Lyman—as Lipsha sees him, "a big, bland Velveeta . . . this reservation's biggest cheese" (15). Lyman's capitalistic version of gambling engenders his predatory appropriation of Fleur Pillager's land and the lake, which, Lipsha believes, is still inhabited by Misshepesu the water spirit. (Brehm 698). This act is an overt attack on the ultimate mother figure in the novel, Fleur Pillager.<sup>19</sup>

Motherhood, motherland, the search for the mother, etc. have long been associated with raced identity in ethnic literature. Lipsha, still pining for his dead mother June, sees himself as competing with Shawnee Ray's son Redford (165). In this regard Shawnee Ray is set in sharp contrast to the absent mothers—her own mother Irene Toose, Lipsha's dead mother June Morrissey—and to Zelda, deficient mother to Albertine, overbearing

foster mother to Shawnee Ray. This maternal theme is connected to the Pocahontas trope of marrying white men in one of Erdrich's typically complex family subplots: Zelda, having been married to a white man for years, returns at long last to her Indian true love. Having done so, she stops trying to control Shawnee Ray by keeping her on the reservation with the custody suit, freeing Shawnee Ray to go to college. Even June, whose final sordid journey with a white man led to the white death in a blizzard in *Love Medicine*, reappears in spirit form in the penultimate blizzard scene of *The Bingo Palace*, thus reinforcing the resonance of the return of the mother with a breaking away from the Pocahontas conundrum: Shawnee Ray goes to the white world with the expectation of cultural interchange and success on her own terms without exploitation or loss of her Indian identity, bringing her child with her. So far, she has escaped the penalty of death by contamination suffered by Pocahontas.

Though she leaves the reservation as Bonnie Red Bird did, Shawnee Ray has clear goals in terms of subjectivity and self-expression. Kate Loney collects Indian art, but Shawnee Ray is an artist. She literally writes her identity on bodies: her own and whoever her clients will be, whoever buys into her subjectivity, so to speak. Her designs are constructed in terms of mainstream fashion—not all her clothing is traditional—but they literally dance around the borders. Lipsha describes her ensemble: “a suit jacket and a pair of pants the tan of eggshells, with symbols picked out in blue thread on the borders, the cuffs, and the hem . . . she is dressed up to match my bingo van” (68).

Whereas Bonnie Red Bird plays with the master's tools in a gendered play for raced agency that ultimately leaves her a “captive woman,” Shawnee Ray Toose uses the master's discourse of American fashion to construct an agency which incorporates both gender and race/ethnicity on her own terms. Kate Loney is also successful in establishing agency in the white world, but she pays the price of living alone in it. Shawnee, though alone with her son at the end of the novel, has a strong spiritual tie to Lipsha. The ending of the novel offers a refreshing foil to the never-never land at the end of the Disney movie where Pocahontas and John Smith say goodbye but promise to always be together in spirit.

Maternity plays a redeeming role in all three works. Kate's relation to her younger brother is maternal, as is her career as an educational consultant. Bonnie, despite her peccadilloes, plays a responsible and even sacrificial role with her children, endangering her own safety and ultimately her freedom in order to redeem them from state custody. As with Bonnie, Shawnee Ray's greatest challenge seems to be keeping her

child from the clutches of others.

Shawnee Ray shows that cultural borders can be crossed and negotiated without loss of life or loss of identity. The Pocahontas myth is the most cogent articulation of the gendering of raced subaltern status as female. The destabilization of gender roles in Erdrich's novel, whether it is read as a direct critique of the Pocahontas myth or not, recognizes the necessity of disrupting this longstanding pattern in colonialist mythology. At the same time the novel refuses to undermine the force of the maternal: the novel returns that force from the service of Euroamerican dynasty to its proper locus in Shawnee Ray's own heritage. Given her seeming success in negotiating the perils of the borderlands without succumbing to the seductions of white men or white culture, some would argue that Shawnee Ray is not a Pocahontas figure at all. And perhaps the mark of a successful reinscription of a problematic ideological icon is that the icon is rendered unrecognizable. Be that as it may, Erdrich's work in *The Bingo Palace* is significant in moving beyond Lipsha—another masterpiece of contemporary fiction, but still male—to focus on a contemporary Indian woman who not only does not die, but seems to have a future in a positive mode of cross-cultural exchange.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>In this passage Seals' narrator Storyteller informs the reader that "there are a number of people who are scouring the countryside looking for [Seals] right now, and if they catch him, they swear they'll murder him on the spot . . . Seals didn't know what he was doing . . . No wonder the college professors sneered" (1-2). Seals's first novel owes as much to the tradition of Juvenalian satire as to the tradition of Cheyenne medicine and as such is inevitably offensive to some readers, particularly those who feel that sacred Native traditions should not be discussed in secular venues.

<sup>2</sup>One recent discussion of portrayals of Native American women by European American writers, at least through the nineteenth century, is Robert Tilton's *Pocahontas: The Evolution of a Narrative* (1994). See also Asebriit Sunquist, *Pocahontas & Co.* (1987), a study of all fictional American Indian women in nineteenth century literature. Not to be confused with these in subject matter is Mary V. Dearborn's *Pocahontas's Daughters* (1986), which focuses on ethnic women writers rather than the

depiction of ethnic women by the dominant culture. Dearborn covers a broad range of material but, with the exception of Mourning Dove's *Coge-we-a* (1927), has little to say specifically about novels by Native American women.

<sup>3</sup>In *The Sacred Hoop*, Paula Gunn Allen discusses the former power of women among eastern coastal tribes and documents the power of Cherokee women in particular to decide the fate of captives (34-36). Accounts of such actions by young women of eastern tribes are found as early as Cabeza de Vaca's *Relaciones*.

<sup>4</sup>Scheick's source is "*The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Albert Ellery Bergh (16:452); letter written 6 December 1813 (11:353-54). Apparently another southerner, William Byrd, had expressed the same sentiments a century earlier. Citing Byrd's similar statement in *Histories of the Dividing Line Between Virginia and North Carolina*, ed. William K. Boyd (3-4), Scheick depicts Pocahontas's marriage as an undertaking for "practical reasons" of the sort suggested by Byrd "soon transformed from dubious undertaking to benign legend" (100).

<sup>5</sup>For one well-reasoned opposing view see Hertha Dawn Wong's *Sending My Heart Back Across the Years: Tradition and Innovation in Native American Autobiography* (107).

<sup>6</sup>Larson omits Mourning Dove's novel from consideration due to questions about the extent of the intrusions of her collaborator's voice into the text. Dearborn hinges much of her argument on the Pocahontas paradigm in the writing of ethnic women on an anxiety of such male influence ("fatherly midwiving" of texts by the "Dark Woman" in the words of Kenneth Lincoln, commenting on Dearborn [172]). Be that as it may, authorial agency usually transcends editorial mangling or undue influence by a paternal (or maternal) muse: Black Hawk's autobiography is his, Winnemucca's is hers, but *Black Elk Speaks* is John Neihardt's, etc. See also note below on Erdrich and Dorris.

<sup>7</sup>Some of these should be more properly considered stories of "Pocahontas's daughters" in the sense that the protagonists are of mixed ethnicity. Issues of ancestry are prominent in Allen's, Hale's, Dorris's, and Power's novels, supporting Dearborn's argument that such "an obsessive concern with ancestry" tends to appear "among later ethnic writers" (126).

<sup>8</sup>Gates's critical work *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* develops his thesis about the literary practice of "signifying" as a way in which African American writers and story-

tellers appropriate and refashion elements of dominant narratives for their own purposes. The concept has wide-ranging application in the field of minority and post-colonial discourse.

<sup>9</sup>To fully explore the self-sacrificing trope of the Indian love interest in American literature and film is somewhat beyond the scope of this essay. One early example is Magawisca in Catharine Maria Sedgewick's *Hope Leslie* (1827), though in that case the maiden lost not her life, but only her arm. Recent examples include Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers* (1966) and the film *Thunderheart* (1992). It is probably important to note, however, that the literary connection of love with death does not originate with the raced woman of colonialist literature. Sex was, indeed, dangerous for women, particularly with the sharp rise in maternal mortality rates that seems to have accompanied the rise of physician-assisted childbirth in hospital settings in early modern Europe.

<sup>10</sup>The author is indebted to Scott Andrews at University of California, Riverside for pointing out the significance of the road trip genre to this novel.

<sup>11</sup>African American scholar Ronald A.T. Judy describes Spanish conquest in the "New World" as a catachrestic moment for modernity and the "correctness of Reason": "When the 'Indian' and the 'Negro' appear as human, but function in ways that violate fundamental precepts of reality, they threaten not only a multiplicity of perspective, but a multiplicity of worlds as well" (83-84). Expanded beyond its normal usage to describe short phrases and strained figures of speech, I find the concept of catachresis as "abusive misuse" useful in considering the historical context of postmodernism as well as in a more specific application to Native American "black" or "survival" humor.

<sup>12</sup>The scene in which Philbert masturbates with a girlie magazine on top of sacred Bear Butte—"A spread eagle wed a golden eagle!"—and "became the sun" (110) explores the outer boundaries of this trope: self-abuse in the literal sense, abusive in the sense of being sacrilegious to Native American readers, abusive of mainstream readers' presumed sensibilities, and a *reductio ad absurdum* of the moment of epiphany.

<sup>13</sup>See, for example, his essay "Trickster Discourse: Comic Holotropes and Language Games."

<sup>14</sup>Seals is not unaware of this issue; he addresses it with typically complex irony when Storyteller summarizes Bonnie's sexual exploits by saying, "I'll tell ya, this girl is about as innocent as Madonna" (*Sweet*

*Medicine 2*).

<sup>15</sup>It is perhaps important to make explicit here that my discussion of Pocahontas's sexuality is a discussion of the Pocahontas myth as developed by white male colonialists, not a discussion of the historical Pocahontas figure, though Rolfe's comment about her is certainly relevant. White European explorers brought a cultural baggage to bear upon first contact with indigenous American women that both distorted their perceptions and encouraged the practice of fantastical literary embellishment. A full discussion of this culture clash is beyond the scope of this paper. However, one telling example is Amerigo Vespucci's credibility-stretching description of "women, being very lustful, (who) cause the private parts of their husbands to swell up to such a huge size that they appear deformed and disgusting; and this is accomplished by a certain device of theirs, the biting of certain poisonous animals. And in consequence of this many lose their organs which break through lack of attention, and they remain eunuchs" (Berkhofer 8).

<sup>16</sup>Published interviews of Erdrich and the late Michael Dorris discuss their collaborative relationship. Nevertheless, *Bingo Palace* was published under Erdrich's name alone, as other novels are published under his, or both. See also note 6, *supra*.

<sup>17</sup>For the originary discussion of the language of fetishization and the gaze in cinema, see Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." Many feminist psychoanalytic critics have discussed the fragmentation of female body parts in cinema and commercial photography.

<sup>18</sup>Barak asserts without elaboration (as to Lyman) that Lyman and Lipsha both "possess berdache characteristics" (56).

<sup>19</sup>In Brehm's interpretation, Fleur sacrifices her life to save Lipsha (697). Brehm is reading the story in the context of Chippewa mythology and in particular the child-stealing water spirit. Lipsha has somewhat inadvertently "stolen" a white man's child at the end of the novel; Lyman is attempting to steal Shawnee Ray's child. One can also read the ending as Lipsha's sacrifice to save the white child.

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## *Call for Submissions*

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### Constructions of Memory in Contemporary American Literature

International Conference organized by  
Université Paul Valéry, Montpellier III  
Centre Universitaire Vauban, Nîmes  
June 21-23, 2000

The construction of American identity accompanying the territorial expansion of the United States involved the rejection or negation of Old World and Native American cultures. Now, however, with the rise of ethnic or minority literatures, contemporary U.S. writers are returning to this “forgotten” past. These alternative sites of memory may have no more valid claims to representing objective reality than the federating concepts that formed an earlier national literature. But in contrast to that work of homogenization, the new literatures of the United States are characterized by plurality, interactivity and synergy. They announce a multicultural United States whose features are not yet defined. Contemporary acts of memory are not simply nostalgic returns to the past; rather, in the most accomplished works, they are transfigurations of the present.

We invite scholars of contemporary literature to reflect on the rediscovery and transformation of the past, following a number of possible directions:

- Representation of pre-Colombian cultures
- Representation of ways of life that were abandoned during the great waves of immigration
- Return to continents left behind—Africa, Asia, Europe
- Return to key moments in the history of the U.S.

Emphasis should be given to the new artistic forms employed in these acts of memory and to the redefinition of American modes of expression that they entail.

Send inquiries and abstracts of 150-200 words (before January 30, 2000) to any of the organizers listed below:

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Simone Pellerin:	<a href="mailto:pellerin@smr1.univ-montp3.fr">pellerin@smr1.univ-montp3.fr</a>

## ***Review Essays***

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### ***Observations of Another Trotline Runner: A Critical Discussion of D. L. Birchfield's Oklahoma Basic Intelligence Test***

*The Oklahoma Basic Intelligence Test: New and Collected Elementary, Epistolary, Autobiographical, and Oratorical Choctologies* (1998) by the Choctaw writer D.L. Birchfield is a rarity in the publishing world. It is a work that conforms to American Indian compositional principles, not to Euroamerican rhetorical imperatives.

*The Oklahoma Basic Intelligence Test* advances ideas, and even entire chapters, in ways that are more paratactic than hypotactic, a method which in Eric Havelock's view of language privileges the paratactic, or oral quality of a work, over its hypotactic or post oral characteristics. In this work, arguments are not prioritized or ranked. Neither are they schematized or overburdened with definition and qualification. Cause and effect are generally left to the reader's imagination. Since hypotaxis, or subordination, is minimized, all portions of the book contribute equally to the work's totality. The final chapter simply reiterates the first. Intervening chapters restate others in widely divergent ways. Chapters can be read in any order without loss of continuity or meaning. This paratactic form, revealed in the work's content, suggests that *The Oklahoma Basic Intelligence Test* has some kinship to works in the American Indian oral tradition, and a close reading of the work reinforces that analysis.

Birchfield's controlling metaphor for *The Oklahoma Basic Intelligence Test* is trotline setting. A trotline is a long fishing line strung across a river or section of a lake. On the trotline hang numerous smaller lines,

which are baited so that one person can catch, or as the Choctaws say, *kill* many fish at one time. In some places, trotlines are illegal and are consequently “run” at night. Our narrator’s lines are baited with live perch, not dead bait, so they are first class, premium lines and presumably legal. In Birchfield’s book, all the chapters hang on one continuous thematic line, the betrayal of the Choctaw Nation by the United States. The smaller lines are all connected to the trotline and supply it with a quite varied “catch.”

It is fair to say that *The Oklahoma Basic Intelligence Test* is a work of nonfiction that satisfies like real fiction. It has a plethora of characters, but no character development. Characters and themes transform but do not ripen into finely drawn studies or disquisitions of incremental intellectual maturity. Characters and themes are mature at the onset. They have their say and then move on.

*The Oklahoma Basic Intelligence Test* is marginal discourse that draws on Choctaw tradition to make its case. That this volume got published is a marvel, since most American Indian works that do observe American Indian narrative practices find their way to the reject heap, not to B. Dalton’s. That it was published by a press that promotes American Indian works perhaps explains this particular publication phenomenon.

In his review of *The Oklahoma Basic Intelligence Test* in the Fall issue of *Studies in American Indian Literatures* (1998), Robert Conley (Cherokee) relates that his initial reaction to Birchfield’s suggested plan of organization was that the “idea was totally insane. It would not be a collection. Rather it would be a mad hodge-podge of unrelated, disconnected individual items” (95). Upon seeing the completed version, Conley reversed his position and wrote that the completed manuscript “worked brilliantly.” It belongs, he continued,

to that category of Native literature which most troubles non-native readers, editors, and literary critics, that peculiarly Native category of Momaday, Silko and Vizenor. It’s a category in which the writer creates his own genre with each book he writes. (95)

At first glance, *The Oklahoma Basic Intelligence Test* does appear to be a collection of unrelated essays, autobiography, war stories, fishing stories, hunting tales, poems, letters, histories, literary criticism, and social commentaries ranging from a comparative study of dictionaries to an inquiry into the appropriateness of Oliver La Farge’s first dedicatory note for *Laughing Boy*. The essays, written in prose, poetry, and occasional

trickster discourse, wander from recipes for stove-top blackberry dumplings to a critique of *Lonesome Dove*. The essays are punctuated with encomia to Pushmataha and catcalls for the decision of Robert Maynard Hutchins and Mortimer Adler to abolish football at the University of Chicago. The essays speak not only to readers, but to other published works as well. The book is a self-conscious literary work that derives from the American Indian oral tradition, speaks to the Euroamerican literary tradition, while adhering to the principles of Choctaw story telling and ceremonial life.

In an interview, the Reverend Mr. Randy Jacob, a Choctaw scholar from Broken Bow, Oklahoma, explains that the well composed American Indian text is designed to confuse the hearer or reader. In the oral tradition, good story tellers do not tell all of the story. The hearer/reader must supply the missing parts of a narrative and comprehend the point of the work by means of his or her own intellectual efforts. For this reason, many oral works do not move along a chronological plot line in which first one event happens and then another. Works in the oral tradition seldom demonstrate cause and effect. Events transpire, and the hearer/reader must infer possible cause and effect, significance, and chronology if such categories are necessary for comprehending the meaning of a narrative. Since a narrative assumes different meanings as the interpretative abilities of the hearer/reader change with age and experience, narrative, like the hearer/reader, stays in a constant state of interpretative motion. All this is not to say that there is no truth to a story; it is to say, however, that truth or meaning must be perceived by a Choctaw in his own time and in his own way. It goes without saying that writing a piece of literary criticism that interprets a work violates principles of Choctaw epistemology, since the hearer/reader must do his or her own independent thinking. Because literary critics, Indian and non-Indian, are enmeshed in a publish or perish *Catch 22*, this Cherokee critic will write and hope that Choctaw readers will overlook the inappropriate activity. Without doubt, Choctaw readers will offer their own responses to this text.

Many modern American Indian publications take much of their form and content from works in the American Indian oral tradition. Cases in point range from journalistic essays such as Alexander Posey's early twentieth century Fus Fixico letters to novels like Leslie Silko's *Ceremony* (1977) or Irvin Morris' *From the Glittering World* (1997). Like their archetypal models, these works usually contain creation accounts, land narratives, animal narratives, hero or warrior reports, and a trickster component. Like the sacred ceremonies they emulate, these modern writings pay spe-

cial attention to the power and importance of words. Portions of such narratives are written in poetry, the language of orality. Like the early sacred narratives, such works also honor the directions, the earth, and the beings that inhabit the earth. In addition to their entertainment function, these modern narratives are twentieth-century verbal ceremonies which have a serious intent. The novels cited above refute the image of the demoralized American Indian and make a case for the continuance of American Indian sacred traditions in the modern world. The Fixico letters uphold the efficacy and integrity of the old ways as compared to the chicanery and duplicity of the dominant society. *The Oklahoma Basic Intelligence Test* takes its place within this genre of works inspired by the spirit and intent of the oral tradition.

Birchfield has structured his book into four parts. Four is a weighted number for Indians, since that number symbolically gives geographic and social definition to a piece in terms of land, living creatures, and direction. In addition to representing the four directions, the number four refers to the four stages in the life of man—infancy, childhood, adulthood, and old age. It also represents the four species of life on earth—the four leggeds, the two leggeds, the birds, and the fish. Four symbolizes the four seasons and the four races—black, white, brown, and red. Since direction cannot logically be separated from the land, the two can be considered metonymic. In Choctaw thinking, land cannot be disengaged from people. In a conversation with me in 1998, Betty Jacob, Choctaw linguist and scholar also from Broken Bow, explains that:

the name *Oklahoma* is two Choctaw words joined together. *Okla* means “people” and *homa* means “red.” It is not necessary to add a word to the agglutinate *Oklahoma* meaning “land” because Choctaws feel that setting a foot anywhere on the earth’s surface makes them part of the land beneath them.

Birchfield’s quadripartite compositional structure immediately suggests that the work will contain themes directly related to land and people.

The introductory matter of *The Oklahoma Basic Intelligence Test* confirms these suspicions. The first written section, “Elementary Choctology,” defines the subject as Choctaws and gives two very different views of their nature. These differing observations were made by the same person, Kerleric, Governor of French Louisiana in 1753 and in 1754. The first perspective indicates that the Choctaws are “true to their plighted faith.” The latter maintains that the Choctaws are “covetous, lying, and

treacherous.” That Choctaws have been true to their plighted faith in regard to their dealings with the United States is the main theme of *The Oklahoma Basic Intelligence Test*. That they are “covetous, lying, and treacherous” suggests that trickster dialogue will occasionally befuddle the narrative, but Birchfield, with his coinage of the word *Choctology*, clearly intimates that the trickster attitude should not obscure the major thrust of the work. Perhaps as in the hymn, “Doxology,” Birchfield’s “Choctology” is indicating that *The Oklahoma Basic Intelligence Test* is essentially a song of praise to Choctaws, and the word further suggests that a connection is being made between *The Oklahoma Basic Intelligence Test* and works of an ancient and sacred nature. The “Doxology,” which derives from the *Geneva Psalter*, 1551, is a hymn used at most religious observances by Protestants of the Reformed traditions.

Once Birchfield has clearly established that Choctaws are the subject of his book, he moves to the next important feature of an American Indian work—the creation account. The second written section, or “Choctology 101,” details the emergence of the Choctaws from *Nanih Wayih*, their Mother Mound in the lower Mississippi valley. The Choctaws are the world’s oldest people; they were the last to emerge from the sacred mound and were allowed to live near it. It was there they received the gift of corn and the knowledge to cultivate it.

The third introductory section of *The Oklahoma Basic Intelligence Test*, “Intermediate Choctology,” reiterates the importance of place by making explicit the land narrative suggested earlier. Geographic locations are specifically named, e.g., Oklahoma, Rich Mountain, and Black Mesa. In American Indian works the land is never just a background for a plot; to a large extent, the land narrative informs the plot. In American Indian literature, land generates the narrative. Land, permeated with the essential essences of the creating divinities, is the place where everything begins. A land narrative prescribes a work’s major themes. As the interpretative center of the work, the land narrative reflects the truth of the story. Characters lie. Narrators are forgetful and sometimes suspect. The land is constant and is the most reliable of all narrators.

This third introductory section, which sets in motion the land narrative, also introduces the reader to the importance of words, particularly the importance of Choctaw words as it advances the theme that Choctaw talk, and everything that implies, is central to this book’s meaning. “When the Choctaws talk from the top of Rich Mountain, you have to go all the way to the panhandle to find anywhere in Oklahoma where anyone can do any taller talking” (6).



That we are going to be presented with “tall” talking suggests that the subject matter of *The Oklahoma Basic Intelligence Test* will have “stature,” or importance. It further implies that the talking will be “tall” in a metaphorical sense as in folk tale or “tall tale” or fable. At no point, however, will the humor of the tall talk undercut the work’s serious nature. In *Ancestral Voice: Conversations with N. Scott Momaday* by Charles L. Woodard (1989), the Kiowa writer says that “the humorous element [of language] is one of the chief manifestations of a defensive attitude. Humor is really where the language lives . . . . It’s very close to the center, and very important” (31).

Part 1 of *The Oklahoma Basic Intelligence Test* begins with a quiz, again perhaps reminiscent of Momaday’s practice of beginning his classes with trivia games (Velie 101). Birchfield’s quiz, “The Oklahoma Basic Intelligence Test: Are You Smart Enough To Be An Okie?”, serves as a humorous overview of the themes he will develop in the book, particularly those of land defilement, words, sports, treaties, and people. Following the introductory quiz, with its amusing questions and wry answers, is a poem, “Have You Heard About America?” This verse serves as the serious summation of one of the book’s central themes, the abrogation of all treaties made between the Choctaw Nation and the United States.

First they want to be your friends<sup>1</sup>

Then they want to build a wagon road  
through where your live<sup>2</sup>

Then they want you to move<sup>3</sup>  
Then they want to build a railroad  
through where they moved you to<sup>4</sup>

Then they want to move in with you<sup>5</sup>

Then they want you to keep quiet  
and stay out of their way  
while they tell the world  
that ever since then  
your nation has been past tense

The footnotes refer to the 1786, 1801, 1830, 1866, and 1907 treaties with the Choctaws, all of which were broken by the United States. This poem and

the following chapter, "Using and Misusing History," underscore the two major themes of the book, the betrayals of the Choctaw Nation by the United States and the distortion of American Indian history by advocacy journalism and popular American fiction, two genres that obscure the realities of the betrayals.

To make his point about the misrepresentation of American Indian history, Birchfield cites several cases of careless historical citations and ambiguous dictionary definitions which, in his words, "refer to the past in terms of the present" (23). Such "trickster" reporting undermines accuracy, and with accuracy undermined, fallacies proliferate. For example, Birchfield says that, in an entry about Choctaws, *The American Indian Almanac* (for which he gives no bibliographic citation) states that "After being forced to cede their lands in Mississippi and Alabama and to move to Oklahoma, the Choctaws established their own government" (23). Birchfield explains that in 1830 there was really no such place as "Oklahoma." A certain territory west of the Mississippi would be designated Oklahoma Territory in 1890 and a state named Oklahoma would enter the Union in 1907. Prior to 1890, however, there was no Oklahoma, so Choctaws technically could not have been removed there.

Actually, the Choctaws were moved to what would become Indian Territory, not Oklahoma Territory, so there is yet another error in *The American Indian Almanac's* sentence; furthermore, Choctaws had a government before they were removed to the West, but the sentence as it stands implies that they did not. In one simple entry, there are three major errors that distort tribal organization, geographical polity, and historical reality. These distortions, which seem to be innocent historical summaries, may seem innocuous, but they are not. Choctaws were settled, agricultural people with well developed governments at contact. They were not wanderers in search of a viable political system and a home.

Birchfield's succeeding chapters emphasize the dangers of advocacy journalism by underlining the power of words. Traditional American Indians tend to believe in the efficacy of words, particularly Native words. Joseph Epes Brown, in *I Become Part Of It: Sacred Dimensions in Native American Life* (1992), writes that in American Indian languages "the understanding is that the meaning *is* in the sound, it *is* in the word: the word is not a symbol for a meaning which has been abstracted out, word and meaning are together in one experience" (13). As N. Scott Momaday points out in his monograph, "The Native Voice," which appears in the *Columbia Literary History of the United States* (1988), "language is sacred [and] words . . . bring about physical change" (7).

Given these conceptions, it is easy to see why Birchfield devotes so much space in *The Test* to dictionaries, word meanings, lexicographical reliability, and Choctaw words. Words, particularly Native words, empower a text. They give a work authority and sustainability. By the same token, words used in an indiscriminate or “trickster” way weaken a text, make possible inaccurate readings, create ambiguities, and violate the intent of a work. It is ambiguous word choice that sustains advocacy journalism, which in turn undermines the truth about American Indians, their cultures, and their history. Inappropriate words create damage and chaos.

To protect his manuscript and empower it, to send it out as a statement of truth about the unwavering military loyalty of the Choctaw Nation to the United States in the face of broken treaty after broken treaty, Birchfield includes a medicine chapter, or a chapter given over to a narrative of the old ways of the Choctaws expressed in the Choctaw language. This portion of the book, “Obalaka Apistikeli Is Hard to Find,” recalls the ancient times of the Choctaws when they hunted, emigrated, or sent out war parties with the assistance of a *pelichi bina*, or camp leader who was accompanied by an *obalaka apistikeli*, or guardian from behind. The leader and the person guarding the backtrail also had a scout, the *tikba pisa*, to check out the area surrounding the group’s movement and be on guard for surprise ambushes. The fourth essential person in a scouting party was the *honi bina*, or camp cook, who always left out food each night for the *obalaka apistikeli*.

It is for *tikba pisa* to range far ahead and from side to side, to learn what lies ahead, and to find his way to his hot supper and dry bed at the *bina* before dark.

It is for *obalaka apistikeli* to guard the backtrail and be hard to find.

It is for *honi bina* to tend the fire and cook.

It is for *pelichi bina* to do some great thing. (51)

Birchfield’s medicine text emphasizes danger and the execution of great deeds. Thematically this chapter underscores much of the book’s content, which relates the works of Choctaw leaders, heroes, and warriors like Pushmataha, Muscokubi, Homassatubbee, Yockonahoma, Tobocoh, Aiahokatubbe, and Puckshennubbe. These names give power, strength, integrity, and authority to his text. The persons so named stand in stark relief to the villains recounted by this text, men such as Major Earl Van

Dorn of the United States Cavalry who “attacked and destroyed a joint encampment of Wichitas and Comanches near the present town of Rush Springs, [Texas]” (146) or Texas Ranger Captain John Ford who “crossed the Red River into present-day Oklahoma, and, in the early morning hours of May 12, 1858, attacked without warning and destroyed a Comanche village . . . killing seventy-six people” (145).

To achieve some sexual balance in his work, Birchfield’s text does not forget women and their efforts to preserve American Indian culture and tradition. He devotes space to the Choctaw historian, Anna Lewis, who published a work on Pushmataha, and to the Euroamerican historian Angie Debo who devoted a lifetime to writing about American Indians and their sufferings at the hands of the United States.

In addition to setting the historical record straight in matters of American Indian affairs, Birchfield takes on the fictional record as well. Of great significance is the fact that *The Oklahoma Basic Intelligence Test* speaks to many other texts produced by popular American culture. Writers of American Indian literature, with few possible exceptions, rarely engage Euroamerican writers in literary dialogue in their works. They sometimes “speak” to one another, but rarely do they allude to, praise, attack, or even recognize the works of Euroamericans. Birchfield initiates both literary conversation and confrontation; he makes the basic point that American Indians write American literature.

High on Birchfield’s list of novels that fail to portray American Indians with either accuracy or humanity is Larry McMurtry’s *Lonesome Dove* and its portrait of Blue Duck, the work’s ostensible villain. McMurtry’s bad Indian perpetuates the stereotype of the murderous, red skinned renegade who kills innocent white settlers randomly and purposelessly. Such stereotypes are largely unfaithful to American history and are insulting to American Indian people. These stereotypes partly derive from the fallacies of historians such as Frederick Jackson Turner and Walter Prescott Webb, a historian who reported with “glee . . . the genocidal activities of the Texas Rangers against Indians” (139). Historians like Webb and Turner, and the many unnamed writers of dictionary and encyclopedia entries, distort American Indian history, tradition, and cultural practices to the extent that most Americans, or Oklahomans writ large, have false conceptions of American Indian people and their lives.

*The Oklahoma Basic Intelligence Test* is not critical of all Euroamerican writers. In Birchfield’s view, Joan Didion comes across quite well. “[W]e bonded in spirit” (130). Similarly he has accolades for Steve Frazee, Jim Kjelgaard, Stephen Meader, and Lew Dietz, writers of

juvenile outdoor fiction. He is undecided about Tony Hillerman, familiar with Tom Robbins, and noncommittal about Thomas Harris. He tells us that he reads *The Daily Oklahoman*, *Sports Afield*, *Lucas on Bass Fishing*, and the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. He is familiar with the *Oklahoma State Constitution*, Charles Kappler's *Laws and Treaties*, *Macbeth*, and "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." All this literary title dropping underlines his point that he is an American, an educated American, and a Choctaw American who sees himself as part of the Euroamerican literary tradition. He is a contributor to that tradition, and a spokesman for it. Like most American Indians, he does not see himself as the mute Savage Other, but instead sees himself, and other Indians, as part and parcel of the American experience—literary, social, and political. The oxymoronic *Oklahoma Basic Intelligence Test* is really *The Ordinary American Basic Intelligence Test of Indian Americana*. It examines the American reading public's awareness of Indian affairs and publishes its findings.

It is not too surprising that scores are low given the less-than-accurate writing practices of historians and fiction writers, but *The Oklahoma Basic Intelligence Test* does not stop with noting the gaps in the American public's knowledge of Indians. It corrects part of that unawareness by imparting interesting and little known information about various Nations and their leaders. In other words, it provides a cure for the national illness. It is a type of lighthearted healing ceremony, and its humorous remarks show a literary kinship to Alexander Posey's *Fus Fixico Letters* and to some of Will Roger's acerbic witticisms.

It is common for many North American Indian Nations to begin important ceremonies with games. Stickball games, played by men, women, and children, precede the sacred stomp dances for members of the Five Tribes of which the Choctaws are a part. They serve to bring the community together in exercise and good will before beginning the religious ceremonies of the evening. The games help insure a good turnout for the stomp dances, and they emphasize notions of communal effort, physical skill, cunning, and fun. The physical exercise clears the mind and prepares the body for the serious portion of the ceremony. The games rite, in theory if not always in practice, is the prelude to the prayer rite.

*The Oklahoma Basic Intelligence Test* devotes much space to commentaries on football, football coaches and players, football stadiums, and football games. It rattles off old scores and statistics. It summarizes a history of the split T formation and the men who developed it. *The Oklahoma Basic Intelligence Test* also chronicles the author's own football playing days. All this sports talk serves a purpose in constructing

either a serious, Euroamerican, literary work or a ceremonial, American Indian work. The sports scores, statistics, playing fields, and the like replicate the massacre stories, statistics, participants, and locations. They provide an untroubled echo of the war stories. Combat and attack strategies in war and diversion mirror each other. The sports talk performs the same function for Birchfield's ritual text that sports activity contributes to ceremonial life. It is not a needless distraction from the main themes of the work, but is a necessary part of the whole. The sports talk gives perspective to life and to life's concerns. Broken treaties cannot consume present day American Indians; play and community action have to mitigate the suffering. *The Oklahoma Basic Intelligence Test*, like Leslie Silko's *Ceremony* or N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*, is a medicine text, a work which partially reproduces an ancient ceremony and provides for healing or restoration. Unlike these high mimetic works, *The Oklahoma Basic Intelligence Test* is perhaps low mimetic form. It appears to be casual and at times lighthearted, but its thematic core and its structure indicate its serious intent.

Like a medicine text, or sacred ceremony from the oral tradition, *The Test* includes poetry in its composition. In much sacred literature, works like the Christian Bible for example, poetry often points to older sections of the Scriptures. In Birchfield's text, the poetry provides the same function. It metaphorically creates an "older" text that is contrapuntal to the "newer" just as the creation account and the medicine chapter stand in relief to chapters detailing the Ada High School football stadium or the author's reluctance to mow his mother's yard, a chapter that "speaks" to the writer's need for a place to work that is not interrupted by demands of the world.

Much of *The Oklahoma Basic Intelligence Test* is given over to fishing and hunting stories which serve several purposes. They give dimension and specificity to the land narrative that runs through the book. These chapters also expand one of Birchfield's minor themes—the desecration of the American landscape. The narrator fishes in the Muddy Boggy, one of the few rivers in Oklahoma that have not been dammed by the Army Corps of Engineers. He hunts over land that had once belonged to his grandfather but is now changed. "Somebody had bulldozed all the timber across the road in front of Granddad's place. We had intended to camp in that timber" (62). The land narrative and terrain spoiling come together in many chapters. One of the most notable is the one in which the narrator relates that he is trying to find a new place to hunt during deer season:

I finally found it, in the upper watershed of the Kiamichi River, in the Ouachita National Forest of southern LeFlore County in southeastern Oklahoma, a completely hidden valley, nestled along the side of Winding Stair Mountain, tucked away behind Lenox Ridge. (73)

As he hunts in this area he runs across beer cans and other rubbish. Continuing his pursuit of game he finds:

Not just beer cans, but all kind of trash, candy wrappers, pop bottles, an old mattress, piles of complete and utter yuk. Then I heard traffic, the unmistakable whine of automobiles whizzing by at high speed. Then I heard voices. I climbed up onto a modern two-lane highway. (78)

What once had been part of the Choctaw Nation is now a scenic highway going nowhere.

Included also in *The Oklahoma Basic Intelligence Test* are several trickster narratives. Trickster tales are integral parts of many American Indian medicine works, so it is appropriate to find several in this narrative. The most obvious trickster tale in *The Test* is the chapter entitled "To His Honor the Governor," which is satiric writing directed at books, movies, and journals that relate accounts of European heroes trekking through jungles and outwitting hostile natives in order to perform some romantic mission. It spoofs a wide variety of print and film materials ranging from early journals of the Conquistadors, to David Livingstone's *Narrative of an Expedition to the Zansibar and Its Tributaries* (1865), to *Heart of Darkness* (1902), to *The African Queen* (1935), to *Anaconda* (1997). Trickster themes work steadily through *The Oklahoma Basic Intelligence Test* in episodes such as the narrator's tricking his brother into going hunting in a snow storm and then having the process reversed when the narrator himself is tricked into thinking he has found the perfect hunting ground when in fact the area is quite public and adjoins a scenic highway.

Humor pervades the *The Basic Oklahoma Intelligence Test*. We see it working when the narrator tricks his nephew into buying a dictionary he really doesn't want and we find it again in the "tricking" of the Choctaws by the United States. Trickster mechanisms culminate in the book's final chapter which discusses the Treaty of Camp Holmes (1835), a trickster's masterpiece that takes land from non-owners, gives it to non-deservers, and reserves right-of-way for Those-Who-Couldn't-Care-Less-and-Were-

Unlikely-Even-to-Hear-About-the-Transfer.

*The Oklahoma Basic Intelligence Test* incorporates many other attributes of American Indian ceremonial writing. It carries within it a stratum of text devoted to animal life. In addition to the enormous catfish, which are the animal text's main characters, there are mosquitoes and Kitty, eighteen squirrels, carefully described, and a whitetail buck. Rounding out the cast are a hound, a mutt, and five wild turkeys, slightly paranoid. This animal life adds realistic detail to the land narrative and brings to mind the animal and insect characters in many American Indian creation accounts and legends. When the talking anthropomorphic catfish/Choctaw manages to get out of the narrator's live box without serious damage to his person, we have an animal commentary on Birchfield's major theme. Somewhere in the murky regions of the Muddy Boggy not too far from the McGee Valley in the southeastern portion of what is now Oklahoma, this particular catfish lives to tell another tale and trick another fisherman. The big, crafty, catfish/Choctaw is not the Vanishing Catfish of American legend, but is the modern survivor.

*The Oklahoma Basic Intelligence Test* is not just a journalistic fishing expedition or a Choctaw version of *The Compleat Angler*, but as its warrior narratives and medicine chapter suggest, it is a war party bent on setting the record straight. It opposes the fictions of the modern world concerning American Indian history and refutes them in a way that is at once serious but decidedly engaging. It brings to light some heretofore little known facts and enters them into the modern red-white dialogue.

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### ***Philomela on the Plains: Remarks on Mixedblood Intertextual Metaphor in Diane Glancy's Flutie***

Diane Glancy's latest book, *Flutie*, traces the trail of tears the eponymous heroine and her family follow as she struggles to overcome her inability to speak before persons she does not know, as she suffers the taunts of her older brother, a high school drop-out who is sentenced to prison, as she pleads with her father to tell stories from his Cherokee heritage, as she fails to find spiritual comfort in the sermons of a Baptist minister, as she flirts with the dangerous pleasures of alcohol and drugs in country western bars, as her cowboy friend drives her to a beer joint on the Texas line and back, as she, her father and a few others talk and pray in the sweat lodge, and as she eventually embarks on the study of geology at Southwestern Oklahoma State University.

*Flutie* easily fits within the genre boundaries of the coming of age narrative. Conforming to the expectations of the contemporary reader of popular literature, this novella's appeal is sentimental, somewhat feminist, regional, and cross-cultural. It is a spiritual mixedblood tale of flight, near despair and lament in which, nevertheless, a silent voicing of hope emerges from the earthly past.

It was the regional and the sentimental that first struck me when I heard Diane Glancy read parts of *Flutie* in the summer of 1998. I was deeply moved and reminded of having grown up in Northwestern Oklahoma (about thirty miles west of Flutie's home) as I heard descriptions of her family's recognizable restlessness and poverty. Later, having purchased the book, my maudlin indulgence in the author's voice gave way to silent pleasure in metaphor and intertextuality as I discovered that Flutie herself was a reader of stories:

Sometimes Flutie read as the bus tossed down the dirt road and swerved to miss the rock. She read about a man who cut out a woman's

tongue. He'd raped her and didn't want her to tell because he was married to her sister.

Philomela couldn't talk, but she wove her story in a tapestry so her sister, Procne, would know. In a rage, Procne killed her son and fed him to the husband who'd raped her sister. She fled to Philomela, but when her husband followed they turned into bird. (Glancy 37)

Flutie appears to be reading either from Book VI of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* or an encyclopedia of Graeco-Roman mythology. However that may be, whether the Graeco-Roman Philomela flew after her metamorphosis into the nightingale is left unsaid. Neither the ornithological species into which this Athenian princess metamorphosed, *Luscinia megarhynchos*, nor Philomela, with whom Flutie identifies, is Native American. Nor has the nightingale, like Flutie's mother's European ancestors, resettled in Oklahoma or anywhere else in North America, except into the pages of books. Nevertheless, it seems to be the metamorphosed Philomela's bodily flight for which Flutie longs at first:

she stood on the dirt road in the dark waiting for someone to come. Maybe the woman she'd seen in the Green Cafe. Or maybe Flutie would change into a nightingale and leave Western Oklahoma. She held her arms out as if they were wings, but she didn't fly anywhere. (55)

It is not on the nightingale's flight, however, that Flutie will eventually model her own metamorphosis, rather it is on the tongueless Philomela's weaving a tapestry. For Flutie and her family, flight appears to be part of the problem, not the solution. Flutie's Cherokee father, who has *almost* lost his people's tongue, is in Oklahoma as the result of his tribe's flight on the Trail of Tears. Likewise Flutie's German-American mother is associated with flight; she is constantly speeding away from all her Teutonic past except for the linguistic fragment, *ist ja wieder gut*:

Flutie heard her mother's German words, but she never heard her mother talk about her parents, or grandparents, or her past, either. It was as if they didn't exist. She lived only in the moment with nothing behind her. As she drove she rushed away from the past so it wouldn't catch up with her. (51)

Flutie's flight will be a metaphorical, textual flight into her own "tapestry."

In taking the advice of a friend to incorporate the story of Philomela as a “structure of reference for Flutie,”<sup>1</sup> Glancy has informed her novella with an ancient metaphor of metamorphosis and of textuality, in which writing (or weaving images) supplements the muted voice. In Glancy’s hands the story of Philomela becomes an intertextual metaphor that links Flutie’s excruciating muteness with her loss of her father’s Cherokee tongue and heritage and with the rape and mutilation of Indian Territory by European settlers. In its metaphorical dimension, Glancy’s coming of age novella opens onto an intertextual web where the narrative genre loses its ethno-logocentric boundaries in silent stories from all the world. These include the gory stories of rape and tonguelessness, either literal or figurative, as well as the jocular stories of “listening to the nightingale” that are woven around the Ovidian point of reference for literary nightingales.<sup>2</sup> In the non-linear and figural dimension, *Flutie*, both as novella and as eponymous character is a cross-cultural tapestry of metaphoric metamorphoses and intertextual voicings. Whereas in Ovid’s story Philomela and Procne, who becomes a swallow, are blood sisters, in Glancy’s story Flutie and Swallow are “[s]isters of the lightning” (Glancy 35) and sisters-in-law. Whereas in Ovid’s story the mixedblood (half divine, half human) son of the Graeco-Roman god of war literally rapes, mutilates and imprisons his sister-in-law, Philomela, in Glancy’s story Flutie is the figuratively tongueless and imprisoned victim of the conquering, male dominated European culture into which her mixedblood brother has assimilated. Glancy’s Vini is modeled on the actual town of Vici. *Vici* is the last preterite that Caesar, who chopped Gaul into three parts in his history of the Gallic wars, wrote in his famous “*Veni. Vidi. Vici. I came. I saw. I conquered*” (Glancy 77). Concomitantly, in her metamorphic imagination Flutie is the earth and the silent deer whose hooves weave stories with the leaves or with the silent musical notes on the page she observes in the music room at Southwestern State. She is as well the blessed Kateri Tekawitha,<sup>3</sup> whose image on the book cover suggests the cultural syncretism that Flutie’s mixedblood descent embodies. Flutie is a text as well as a Cherokee father’s shy mixedblood daughter, who by studying geology figuratively effects a syncretic rewriting of her culturally mixed heritage and of the stories neither her father nor her mother will tell.

Accompanying the ornithological Ovidian metaphor that informs *Flutie* as intertext, are two related metaphors of metamorphosis that interweave popular car culture, earth science, Oklahoma history and American Indian culture into the text: the territorial chop shop and the volcanic sweat lodge.

### **The Territorial Chop Shop**

Vici, or Vini to use the fictively metamorphosed name of the town near where Flutie lives, sits just a little south of the boundary between the Cherokee Outlet and the land once assigned to the Creeks, then to the Seminoles, then to the Cheyenne-Arapaho, and finally opened up in 1892 to wildly racing, land-hungry white settlers, who chopped it up into homesteads, many of which they later abandoned owing to drought and hunger. Flutie's brother, Franklin, is a specialist in auto parts. He chops hood ornaments from cars. He "appropriates" parts from the '42 Ford Coupe his father is reassembling and sells them back to him. His room is a salvage yard filled with stolen hood ornaments, parts and road signs. Darkling, he and his customizing friends operate a chop shop.<sup>4</sup>

The recurrent motif of the chop shop metaphorically suggests the history of the Cherokee Outlet and all the rest of Indian Territory. Oklahoma, of course, was part of that somewhat amorphously bounded land that the French called Louisiana, the "purchase" of which President Jefferson justified by declaring his intention to chop it up and use part of it as a new home for Flutie's father's ancestors. Although Louisiana was allegedly part of a country ruled by a short Corsican conqueror who needed money to spread "civilization" across the land where Flutie's mother's ancestors lived, it still had to be appropriated from the Quapaws and Osages by "cession" before being chopped up and reassembled into Indian Territory, and then "given" to the Five Tribes in exchange for their eastern lands; and then chopped up again and reassembled and given to other tribes; and then chopped up again and reassembled as Indian Territory and Oklahoma Territory, and finally chopped up again and reassembled in 1907 as a new state. Even today, Oklahoma is a constitutionally informed chop shop operated by developers whose hunger for land is boundless.

This chopped up and customized land in Glancy's text is not just the setting for the story, it is also a character. It is Flutie's double with which she identifies. In Flutie's memory and in her dreams, her own body, Philomela-like, has been in a chop shop operated by a masked white man:

Somehow Flutie cut her face and tongue. The blood was warm as her mother's hand. She was running after Franklin and something hit. She didn't know what. Maybe she ran into the tractor and its sharp seat. It gashed her and they took her to the doctor and he wrapped her in a sheet and they held her down and sewed up her head and

tongue. It was the hospital in Woodward. The doctor looked like Donald Duck in his white coat and mask. The terror unzipped her face. The pain was like the sun.

She still dreamed of it. *Sometimes a doctor in white came in the door and she sat up in her attic bed, hitting her head on the slanting roof. Chop shop. Chop shop. Say that fast five times. The duck was talking. The others were wrapping her up. The white waves of the ocean driving themselves into her face.* (21)

It is through this identification with the land that she begins to recognize her own silently voiced story as she returns from the Salt Plains:

They passed the glass mountains and red mesas. Here were the *voicings*, Flutie thought, the tongues of the land, speaking in short bursts of courage before the wind blew the words back into their mouths. Her eye throbbed. The birds rising on the air currents above the bluffs were the words that the land said. (47)

Having read in the school library of the inland sea that once covered this land, she imagines her tonguelessness to be the result of immersion. Imagining herself metamorphosed into the underwater volcano that she makes for her science project, Flutie experiences the words she cannot utter as tears and as volcanic rock under the now dry sea:

There was a red heat in her. She knew it in school when the teacher talked about an underwater volcano spitting lava into the ocean. Yes. How the water boiled. That's what she felt.

It was what she spoke. Not words. But tears. Melted words. She was a sweat-lodge rock in the morn. And under the tears was her anger in knowing that she couldn't talk when it counted. (25)

### **The Volcanic Sweatlodge**

Although Flutie's father has left behind the stories of the Trail of Tears traveled by his ancestors to the white man's chop shop, he still, despite his wife's nagging, from time to time constructs a sweat lodge in his backyard. This sweat lodge, he says, is all that remains of his Cherokee heritage. In this re-constructed cultural remnant, which recalls Flutie's underwater volcano, Flutie finally experiences a spirituality that puts her on the road to overcoming her tonguelessness. Unlike the Baptist church, which fails to place words in Flutie's mouth—she chokes when she is

immersed (Glancy 23)—the sweat lodge provides *total immersion* in dark tellurian heat where people talk their visions of Flutie talking:

They had revivals when the road was rough, which it always was. But Flutie's father didn't like them. Sometimes some of them had sweat lodges. Flutie's father had bent saplings in the backyard into a new frame. He covered the frame with tarp, until it looked like a small mound. He heated the rocks. Even Ruther took part.

Inside the dark and the heat, Flutie heard her voice. It was the flames of hair on the spirit Ruther saw.

Flutie heard the others, a neighbor and one of the men from Jackson's Auto Repair.

"I see you talking before people, Flutie," Ruther said. "Think of the words coming out your mouth like grain trucks driving to the Farmer's *Co-op*." (123)

Flutie, continuing Ruther's lingual-automotive metaphor, speaks of speaking in the technical language of hot rods: "Like a line of custom cars on the highway, full of pistons and gaskets, cylinder heads and manifolds" (124).

As they continue talking the rough road, Flutie remembers the voices of other oppressed peoples about whom she has read in newspapers, like those from which she molded her papier-mâché underwater volcano. She hears the rocks speak:

They continued to sweat and pray in the lodge. Flutie remembered the people from far away on the earth. Ireland. India. She remembered their voices she'd heard from time to time in the wind. Maybe she'd heard them in other sweat lodge ceremonies. Maybe they came up from the earth. Or from within her head. She felt connected to them all. She wiped her sweat and listened to the earth. To the rocks. (124)

Thus it is in this sweat lodge, in this metaphoric metamorphosis of Flutie's underwater volcano, rather than in her total baptismal immersion in the pond, that the words of Ruther's Baptist minister come to pass:

If she didn't speak, the rocks would speak for her. Isn't that what the gospels said? It was one of the things she remembered the Baptist minister saying.

“Luke 19:40.” She asked Ruther who looked it up in the Bible. (97)

Flutie overcomes her tonguelessness in a syncretic textual interweaving of church, sweat lodge and geology. The earth is part of the tapestry in which she will read and tell the stories her father and her mother cannot tell her. Enrolled for a second try at Southwestern Oklahoma State University, Flutie is taken on a second trip to Texas: “he wasn’t a mechanic or a cowboy, the second man who took Flutie to Texas. He was the instructor of her geology lab” (127). Flying along towards Palo Duro Canyon she ponders a sequel to the story of Philomela’s metamorphosis:

Flutie watched the fields flying by. She felt she was going somewhere in the milky waves that washed up from the old sea.

But where could she go? Where had Philomela and Procne gone when they turned into a nightingale and a swallow? Had they remained birds, flying around, doing what birds did? Or had they turned back into women? Gone to college. Worked at Carpter’s Drygoods. Had the story gone on?

That’s what was wrong with stories. They only told a part. She had to listen, and later think about the story, and fill in the rest. She had to interpret. To decide where the story went. (128)

At Palo Duro Canyon Flutie dug and “heard the old voices of the land” (128). Returning she interprets her own story, rejecting flight and taking in her own hands her metaphorphosis:

Flutie decided she would teach. She would go back to Vini and teach all the students who couldn’t talk. Especially if they’d been sealed up. Those who’d heard the voices of the town. The voices from deep in the earth. She’d place them in front of the class like candles that could not be blown out by the western Oklahoma wind. (130)

When Diane Glancy decided to have Flutie major in geology, she molded her eponymous heroine into a metaphorical embodiment of the project she has undertaken in this book. Like Flutie’s tongueless Graeco-Roman and European literary ancestor, Glancy has woven a tapestry to tell silently the story of her own as well as Flutie’s mixedblood cultural loss. This loss, however, is also a gain. It is the gain of new cultures emerging from the syncretic weaving of a contemporary American Indian literature.

This essay has traced and glossed some of the metaphors that Glancy

has woven into this text. In today's world, many states like Oklahoma have been repeatedly chopped up and reassembled from stolen, or abandoned, or forcibly purchased parts. Many people's tongues have been chopped out by attempts at forcible assimilation and replaced with the tongues of a conquering writing culture. As the twentieth century ends, the stories of cultural and territorial rape, lingual mutilation and flight are being voiced in a postcolonial literary renaissance. Some critics and writers in the American Indian literary movement distrust and even deprecate the written tapestry into which their attempts to maintain their oral culture are paradoxically woven. Glancy's *Flutie* demonstrates in its mixedblood intertextual metaphors, in which writing and oral cultures are inextricably interwoven, that new syncretic cultures are emerging as Native peoples and mixedblood peoples struggle to overcome their tonguelessness.

One of *Flutie*'s ancestors, Sequoyah, whose name knew several metamorphoses, "George Guess, or Gess (or Gist, or Guist, or Guyst)" (Baird and Goble 240-1), devised the 86-character syllabary which he intended to be the means to allow Cherokee knowledge and culture to vie with that of white Americans. Sequoyah, whose restless white father walked out of his home long before *Flutie*'s father's family walked away towards the Cherokee Outlet, created for his tribe an *outlet* without boundaries that could resist the white man's chop shop. In his writerly wisdom Sequoyah knew that such an outlet must be textual as well as territorial.<sup>5</sup> *Flutie* comes with that territory.

Brewster E. Fitz

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Personal communication from Diane Glancy, October 5, 1998.

<sup>2</sup>From Marie de France's *Laüstic*, to Chaucer's "The Legend of Philomela," to Boccaccio's story of Caterina and Ricciardo (*Decameron*, 5th Day, 4th Story), to Shakespeare's hyperbolically gory revenge tragedy, *Titus Andronicus*, to Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale," to the *Cantos* of Ezra Pound, the rape, lingual mutilation, weaving, homicide and anthropophagic vengeance, which figure in the story that Philomela *cannot tell orally*, are a salvage yard of metaphors for storytellers and poets writing to voice darkling unspeakable desires and acts. Of the texts men-



tioned here, Marie de France's *Laiüstic* is historically situated at the contact point between an ascendant writing culture and a surviving oral culture. The *Lais* of Marie de France are written narratives in Old French that gloss songs from the oral tradition of the Ancient Bretons. Marie's story of the nightingale is to the narrative literature of courtly romance, which emerged in the 12th-century from the confluence of Breton oral tradition and Latin writing culture, what Diane Glancy's *Flutie* is to emerging American Indian literature today.

<sup>3</sup>The same friend who suggested that Glancy use the story of Philomela as a reference point sent her a card bearing the reproduction of the painting of the Blessed Kateri Tekawitha. Glancy has told me that she does not know much about this figure, whose syncretism strikes me as appropriate in *Flutie*'s story.

<sup>4</sup>After the fight that precedes Franklin's arrest and his doing time at Stringtown, *Flutie*'s father declares that his son "won't be *feeding* me anymore with my own parts" (Glancy 49; my italics). The literary allusion, as Glancy has avowed, is to Tereus' unwittingly eating his own son whom his wife, Procne, the swallow, feeds him to avenge Philomela's rape and mutilation.

<sup>5</sup>Glancy's choice of an ornithological metaphor of metamorphosis from Graeco-Roman mythology around which to structure *Flutie* could be seen to echo Sequoyah's having chosen the name of a mythological bird for the tribal newspaper: the *Cherokee Phoenix*.

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## *Reviews*

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***Bead on an Anthill: A Lakota Childhood by Delphine Red Shirt. Lincoln: Nebraska UP, 1998. \$25.00 hard cover, \$9.95 paperback, ISBN: 0-80323-908-4. 146 pages.***

Delphine Red Shirt's autobiography, like almost all contemporary reminiscences by Native American women, uses a traditional form: she creates each chapter as a story—one which illuminates a particular issue or point in her life, told like an oral tale. Traditionally, Native tales ground themselves in the place and culture from which they speak, and *Bead on an Anthill* is no exception. Red Shirt has fifteen-sixteenths Lakota and Brulé blood, and descends from several important Lakota chiefs, with whose history she connects, although she often mentions how aware she remains of her small portion of French blood:

My father's father, my grandfather, [with] his green eyes and red bandanna wrapped around his neck, was a tribal policeman. His green eyes came from his half-French father . . . My grandfather was proud of his French blood, his Indian blood, and his horses. (85)

Although Red Shirt's work follows the associative, non-linear oral pattern that Gertrude Bonnin (Zitkala èa) used in the stories collected as *American Indian Stories*, she adds a valuable dimension: frequent use of the Lakota words that encapsulate the experiences she describes. For her, the language is a powerful tool that captures and revives the traditional experience. Growing up in a Lakota-speaking household, Red Shirt found herself losing her sense of self as her education forced her to speak and

think in English, a language she feels tends to ambiguity, even duplicity.

In Lakota, when you say something, it can be taken literally. In English you can say something and mean the opposite, or you can be sarcastic and biting. In Lakota when you say something, it is taken as truth unless, of course, you are a liar. . . . [Then] they would listen to you as if you spoke the truth, but they would know that you are a liar and would have already known that before you began to speak, and everything you say is taken in light of that truth.” (91-2)

Using Ella Deloria’s elaborate typography, she demonstrates and explains the enclitics, the particles that show the type of statement uttered, and whether said by a man or a woman. This use of language adds a strong sense of place and culture to her text.

Like her mother, she is wounded by a stray bullet in the “chaos” that follows the siege of Wounded Knee in 1973. Yet the problems that led to the occupation of Wounded Knee were not solved by that demonstration; indeed, for her family, as for many others on the reservation, she believes, things seemed much worse. Red Shirt recalls how early she understood that “while we lived within the confines of the reservation, we were all under the constant eye and supervision of a benevolent but neglectful government” (99). Isolated, deculturated, and without opportunity, many of her friends took to alcohol, as her much-loved older sister did, and died of it.

In telling her story, Red Shirt emphasizes that “I grew up in a time before the old ways disappeared completely and the new ways emerged in their place.” Much of her story deals with loss—not only her older and younger sisters, but also the old traditions, the old people, who “take with [them] the words . . . that were used in the daily course of life, before English, its sterile sounds and double meanings, invaded our world and our language” (91). She recalls the time when the Sun Dance was again allowed, but feels that it does not return the people to the old reverence. “Once these ceremonies were banned, we lost our center. We became trapped in time and space . . . . We became afraid, and everything seemed unfamiliar” (67).

Red Shirt’s story shows her way of working out of this trap. As a child, she feels that she belongs neither with the fullbloods, nor with the “iye ska,” the halfbreeds, but she notes that the words “iye ska” mean “translator.” Now, she wants to do more with her autobiography than merely translate the story of her life for curious wasicu. She is also writing

to the decultured Lakota, as she recalls the life she would have lived had the Lakota remained traditional, keeping their customs, language, and land. So she frequently compares her experiences with those that she hears from her mother, or that she has learned about. These imagined experiences become more vital for her than her memories of “dressing up” for powwows in unfamiliar, hot deerskin and being stared at by white visitors. Not until her uncle helps her form an all-girl drum, and she feels the music “coming out of every part of her” (110) does she feel connected to that part of her culture. Her autobiography both mourns the loss of her Lakota traditions, and rejoices in her ability to recall them as she speaks of her mother, who grew up knowing many of the traditional ways and ceremonies, and spoke Lakota by preference. Her English-speaking father often left the family, so Red Shirt’s main influences during her childhood were her Mom-mah, her Kah-kah (maternal grandfather) and older brother, all Lakota speakers. Particularly, she focuses on her Mom-mah, and the teachings she tries now to recall, the things she heard as a child without paying strict attention.

In a most moving chapter, she describes the way she would have been expected to behave at her first menses, and the ceremony she would have undergone to learn how to be a proper “buffalo woman.” At the end, the medicine man would tie an eagle plume to her hair and sing her blessing—the same song “that has been sung for my mother, her mother, and her grandmother. It is a song that binds me to them” (125). Her own experiences seem almost to fade against these unexperienced memories. But she connects with the cultural present in the yuwipi ceremony that her mother organizes for her when she completes her tour with the Marine Corps. “When I joined in the singing, I suddenly felt whole” (113). At this ceremony, she receives her new name, Wa suta Waste Wi: “Good Warrior Woman” (115). And it is as Good Warrior Woman that she writes her autobiography.

She concludes her story by recalling her reason for completing her education at Red Cloud School, rather than the reservation public school. She praises the foresight that led that great Lakota leader to invite the “Sapa u pi”—the Catholic “black robes”—to educate the young people on Pine Ridge, even though he felt that their religion was “partial, self-centered, fragmented, and full of fear.” Through the education they gave her, she can write this book. “‘Ho he,’ as Kah-kah used to say, and as Mom-mah says now: ‘That pleases me. It is good’” (145-6).

## ***Contributors***

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