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From California to the Four Corners: An Urban Navajo Returns Home: An Interview with Esther G. Belin

Connie Jacobs

She's an Urban-Raised Indian, a U.R.I with a degree from the University of California, Berkeley who feels "disabled" because "I cannot understand my grandfather when he asks for more coffee" (74). Alternately indignant, angry, grieving, and proud, Esther Belin lyrically examines her identity as a U.R.I. growing up in Los Angeles far from the Navajo Reservation of her extended family and the sacred landscape of her people. Feeling more at home among Los Angeles's urban sprawl than the mesas and arroyos of New Mexico and Arizona, Belin considers her losses that even a degree from Berkeley cannot mitigate. Her parents, relocated from the Southwest in the 1950s by the U.S. Federal Indian Relocation Policy, met at the Sherman Institute in Riverside, California, married, and remained in the area to raise their family. Thus, a generation away from life on the Reservation, its customs, language, and community, Belin speaks to issues faced by growing numbers of Native people who are college graduates, urban, and a product of two conflicting worlds.

Belin poetically rages and arms herself for battle against both the cultural annihilation spawned by relocating Native people to cities and the 500 year legacy of the United States Government's policy to expunge

Native people and cultures. Her weapons are words, her poems and her stories, which assess what remains in the face of such catastrophic losses: language, culture, tribes, an indigenous nation.

From the
melodic muse in my belly I
create what lives: survival
of colored peoples in this
country called the United
States. The cosmos, meteor-
showered with oppression,
cramps my back and balls
my fists, smashing the glass
ceiling against my nose (*Belly* 23)

My natural instinct would be to avoid contact with such an angry voice. After all, she's right. With the help of revisionist history and some long overdue admitted guilt on the part of the United States Government, we Anglo Americans can read the governmental documents that advise removal of Natives from traditional homelands in order to open up areas for Anglo western expansion, promote extermination by spreading contaminated blankets, and make treaties that were never intended to be kept. Had Belin's book been published before I had met her, I would have approached her warily. But as luck would have it, I met Esther in 1997, a few years after she had graduated from IAIA (Institute of American Indian Arts) in Santa Fe, New Mexico with a degree in creative writing. She had met her husband, Don Edd, a sculptor, at the school, and they had come to Durango, Colorado so Don could attend Fort Lewis College. Esther was almost home. Her in-laws lived nearby in Farmington, New Mexico, and she was in close proximity to the Navajo Reservation. Durango is a stopping place in her journey and not a final destination, and I was fortunate to meet Belin through a Durango feminist organization, the Women's Resource Center. We worked together on an annual women's conference, and only accidentally did I realize that this quiet, gentle woman whose young daughters always accompanied her was the same Esther Belin of the raging, protesting voice.

If you know a poet as a person first and the work secondarily, it is nearly impossible to feel threatened by the words. As Esther began giving local poetry readings, I attended them knowing the thoughtful and intelligent mind behind the often angry and bitter words. When she read

“Euro-American Womanhood Ceremony” to my American Literature class, we already knew the horrors of boarding schools, since Fort Lewis College had begun its life in the 1890s as an Indian boarding school. Her words did not assuage our guilt, but at least as a class we were able to pay witness with Esther to the damage, to grieve, and to move on.

After an acquaintance of several years and my attendance at a half a dozen of her readings, I asked Esther if she would be willing for me to interview her for *SAIL*. Since I had introduced her several times at local readings, we had already discussed her themes, style, and voice. However, this time, I wanted an in-depth conversation and not a hurried phone call with this woman whose work I had come to admire. Additionally, since she had just been given the American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation, I felt even more the necessity of letting her voice speak to her growing audience. Our formal interview took place May 16, 2000 at my home. She brought part of her family, as she usually does, her husband Don Edd, two month old baby Chamisa and four year old daughter Sierra. Six year old daughter Ruthie Rae was at school. It is appropriate to begin with an introduction in the Navajo way, and this must be in Esther’s voice, not mine. Quoting from her autobiographical article “In the Cycle of the Whirl” found in *Speaking for the Generations* and in the fourth and final section of *From the Belly of My Beauty*, Esther speaks:

1/4 + 1/4 + 1/4 + 1/4 = FOUR PARTS = MY WHOLE. Who I am is determined by my mother. I am T’ógí, Zia clan, related to Tódich’íí’nii, Bitterwater clan. I am the granddaughter of Pearl Toledo and Richard Antone. My nation is matrilineal and distinguishes maternal relations from paternal . . . (72).

She also gives us bilagaanas a cultural fix on who she is and where she comes from:

Born July 2, 1968 in Gallup, New Mexico, in the old Indian Hospital on the hill. Raised urban among Los Angeles skyscrapers, Mexican gangs, Vietnamese refugees, eating frybread and beans. Middle child. Father from Birdsprings. Mother from Torreon. Daughter of Eddie and Susan. U.S. Federal Indian Relocation Program placed them into boarding schools away from the rez. Five Year Program at Sherman Institute, Riverside, California. Goal: annihilation of savage tendencies characteristic of indigenous peoples. New lan-

guage. New clothes. New food. New identity. Learn to use a washing machine. Learn to silence your native tongue, voice, being. Learn to use condiments without getting sick. Learn a trade and domestic servitude. Learn new ways to survive. (68)

Biographical

Connie Jacobs (CJ): Is there any biographic information you'd like to add to what you discussed in your prose essay in your book?

Esther Belin (EB): No. Writing the essay for part four of the book was partly to see how far I've come and to let myself out as a writer. In the area of Native American literature, readers have so many questions about Native writers, their history and background, so I wrote this essay so that readers would know me. I really don't have anything to add. The book [*From the Belly of my Beauty*] introduces me as a writer, and I'm comfortable about it. It was risky letting readers know so much about me, but it was well received and people have welcomed my book.

CJ: You are from the Zia and Bitterwater Clans. How much does your clan membership define you since you were raised in an urban area away from the Navajo reservation?

EB: The basis for clans is not for relationships (who not to marry) as much as it is for knowing who you are, where you came from. You can always trace your history through clans. This is your connection to the community which keeps you involved even if you don't live there.

CJ: How much time do you get to spend on the Navajo Reservation?

EB: We go to Farmington [New Mexico, a northern boundary of the Navajo Nation] every weekend. We are exposed to traditional food there, plus Shiprock is so close. Don and I need that. It is my "comfort zone."

CJ: Could you ever see yourself living on the reservation?

EB: That is my ultimate goal. That's where I want to be. I would love to have my home there and write and teach. I'm working towards this.

CJ: Would your mom ever consider moving back? Your brother? Your sister?

EB: I think everyone's ultimate goal is to go back to where you started—to complete the circle.

CJ: You write, "The two worlds clashed in me, creating blackness." Do you still feel this way now that you are living closer to the reservation?

EB: Well, it is definitely not black; it's not any color, but the picture is getting clearer. I'm not where I'm supposed to be, yet. I need to get better with the language. I realize I am starting over like a child. People sometimes laugh at me when I speak Navajo. I am an infant, again, crawling. It's a stage where I'm comfortable. Eventually, I'll walk.

I worked in Torreon as an adult in 1993 (for the Torreon Counseling Services), and the language was the biggest stumbling block. My parents did not teach Navajo to us in our home, so I don't know much Navajo. The kids I worked with were great, and didn't feel as left out as I thought I would. They helped me get back in the Navajo community.

I am studying the language with my in-laws, which is a big help. Don speaks the language, and his parents are teaching the girls Navajo. They pick it up so easily at this stage. I want to know, to understand the language linguistically; I want to know the logic behind it. At Berkeley, I wanted to understand why the English language is so dominant so I studied linguistics, and I studied the Chinese language. Chinese is an old language, a pictorial language. You appreciate the drawings and how you put words together. Studying Chinese has helped me with Navajo, and I really like seeing the relationships among languages. In the English language I often find two answers. In Dinetah, there is one answer, one tradition.

The writing process, you as an artist

CJ: You created the monotype for the cover of your book as well as designing the linotype for the inside art. You write poetry and prose, paint in oils, and make videos. Do you have a favorite medium for your art?

EB: I like them all. I find writing the most accessible because of the supplies, but I am starting to crave other mediums—prints and woodcuts. But I would need a studio for that.

CJ: Do you have a routine for writing?

EB: I keep journals for my spurts of writing. I will jot down notes constantly, and then I will have a dry spell before going back to the journal. I always keep a journal when I travel because experiencing new things gets me inspired.

Last month, I went back to Berkeley and to San Francisco, and I experienced a flood of energy to write. I think it was seeing friends, having all

that good food, and feeling the energy of the city. I've been at a standstill here [Durango], a small country town which is so different from the big city.

CJ: You've mentioned that writing comforts you. Would you explain this?

EB: Poems are an attachment of oneself. I see my poems as that attachment. I write about a situation, an experience, and then let it go for someone else to use and interpret. This is how you see yourself grow and see what you are able to do. I like that.

CJ: So much of your poetry is intensely personal. There doesn't seem to be a poet's mask, and you are very direct. This is different from what I have experienced with my Navajo students and colleagues.

EB: I don't have a poet's mask. No matter what I write, I'll always be seen as a Native American writer so it is not worth creating all the layers within the writing. Without the mask, it seems more real, more available to the readers. I see my main audience as Navajo people, those who have relocated and come back where language is an issue for them, and I want to speak directly to them.

CJ: You've mentioned on several occasions that you find writing very easy. With this latest award, do you feel more pressure, and if so, has that made writing more difficult?

EB: I am getting nervous about getting new stuff out. After I returned from my latest trip to San Francisco, I was inspired to keep going, and I have lots of new material. But no, I don't feel pressured.

Writing is considered part of the oral tradition—a presentation, telling your story. Now that people are watching me more carefully, I want to make sure I keep my writing natural because I still have stories I want to tell. I see myself as an interpreter of what happened in my parents' generation, and I want to let people know about their experiences, especially with boarding schools and relocation. I see my book as an anthropological text—telling what it's like for Native people. Writing for me is a gift. If I'm supposed to keep doing it, it will keep coming.

CJ: Your latest award, The American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation, is a great honor. Can you tell me more about this?

EB: When my publicity manager left me a message on my answering machine, I didn't understand all she was saying, but I do remember her telling me to be very excited, that it was a great honor. What I know is that I go to Chicago June 3rd to receive my award along with 15 other winners.

Your poetry: themes, language play

CJ: Last year we discussed the themes of your poetry: urban Indians, you as storyteller with your “recycled” voice, relocation, survival, motherhood, and forced assimilation. Are these still your main themes? Did I get them all?

EB: Yes.

CJ: A reviewer called you “a poet of sorrowful details.” Do you agree?

EB: When you tell indigenous history, it won’t be pleasant. From the sorrow, you see the ability to move on. Part of life is the downs, but not all of my poems are downers; they are only part of the content of my work. A description of Native people as the defeated Indian is only giving a small part of the whole.

CJ: I love the line in the part I prologue, “My expression is a liberation functioning as a contrived reality boxed into Indian.” Do you consider yourself first a Native American writer or a writer of Native American ancestry?

EB: It’s inevitable that people see me first as a Native American, because that is my ancestry and being Native American is an important part of our U.S. history. I consider myself Native American first. I would like Marias [local book store] to place my book in the poetry section, in Native American literature, or even in politics, anthropology, or history. The content in my book covers all areas of Native life, and no single category can label my book. I find that categories get in the way, but Americans like to know who the person is so they can label you. What are you? Who are you? This gets to be a problem especially for minority writers who get seen as secondary. You end up doing that to yourself, and the more you put yourself in boxes, the more you limit yourself.

CJ: It is one mark of your poetic style that you so artfully play with language: hyphenated words (“How Art Opens Ruby’s Eyes,” “drunken,” “Ruby Roast,” “ugly-deep”); boxes (“Check One,” “Ruby Hikes”); different visual arrangements (“Check One,” “Jenny Holzer Inspiration,” “1/4th,” “Ruby in Me #1”); playing with words (“Ruby Awakens”—all the “reds” and “Asdz’aan Tó’dichi’níí —“and by and by/and bye and bye”); lots of re- (“Ruby in Me #2,” and “Homeward”); and alternating the public voice with your private thoughts in “From the Stench of My Belly,” which is part of your graduation speech at Berkeley. You are a poet, and you have studied linguistics and Chinese. I see the visual effects as a combination of these factors, especially the Chinese picto-

graphs, as a way of appreciating the form of words on paper and then trying to approximate this with words and images.

EB: This is the hardest part to talk about, the hardest part of the poetry. It is giving voice to the two-dimensional. Language tricks me into reading to myself, and the way I write is to emphasize points. For example, “re-”; it’s not new; it’s all in side me. I like playing with image and form. You get twice as much in your poetry that way.

CJ: The way in which you combine poetry and prose in your book is very effective. Does this also come out of your experimentation with different forms of language and expression?

EB: I got into the essay writing style, and boom! There was an objective and subjective voice combined. For me, the problem is popping in and out of the poetic form and not worrying about the mechanics. Some academic essays can be so dry, but mine has life. For Native American writers, we are creating/writing our own history. We are not ethnographers; we are storytellers, so our work can go in any direction. In “From the Stench of My Belly,” writing down the thoughts inside me was the best part. I remember once I was doing a reading with a well-known poet who changed a poem, and a student became very upset because the poem wasn’t “right.” What I like is flexibility—once something is written, it can be changed.

CJ: Do you have a favorite poem? If so, which one and why?

EB: I like them all. “Check One” is a favorite because it is short and simple and cant be read. I also like “Ruby’s Answer” because it reads well, flows, and says a whole lot in a short amount of time. I get lots of questions on this poem, I believe, because I have packed so much in it. I talk about a real situation (people who “find” their Indian ancestry), people who aren’t secure with their Indian heritage. You see, I had a preconceived idea of Indian people before college because I was mostly around full bloods. It was eye opening to see there were so many mixedblood students, and it was hard for me to believe we were quibbling over who really is Indian. Especially problematic were the Native Americans who were adopted and raised by whites who didn’t know their Native American culture. For me, it depends on what you do with your Native American ancestry and bow much you know your history and embrace it. When people don’t know where they are from and don’t have a history, that is where misconceptions arise. Even people from four, five tribes usually align with one. My clan, Zia, comes from a Zia woman the Navajos adopted in. We also have Utes and Spanish adopted

into Navajo clans. When I first found out my grandfather is related to the Hopi, I was bewildered. But it really is not such a big deal if you know where you are in the bigger society called Navajo.

CJ: In “Ruby’s Answer,” you tackle a very controversial subject—who is an Indian. With so many of the prominent Native American writers being mixedbloods, this is a loaded topic. You said you wrote this poem at a time when you were trying to define what an Indian is. Have you come any closer to answering this for yourself? For others?

EB: That is very subjective. My experience of “Indian” is still Navajo, which relates to clan, to family. What I find so interesting is meeting other Native people who know their history, background, and ceremonies. In talking to them, you begin to see the connections, and that is what I enjoy—people sharing that knowledge. There are lots of tribal differences, but there are also many similarities. N. Scott Momaday says, “An Indian is an idea which a given man has of himself.” I agree that there are many ways to define a Native person, especially since being an Indian is such a mixed bag.

Ruby

CJ: Ruby is such a great character. You’ve said she is an alter ego, that she likes to live. I see her as a trickster figure who breaks the rules, lives outside time, and eludes assimilation and colonization.

EB: Hum, I’ve never read Ruby as trickster, but I do see the connection. Ruby does fit the trickster role, but she also represents so many different roles. Ruby is more real than trickster. I’ve seen her running down the street.

CJ: How did Ruby come about?

EB: Ruby was inspired from the women I’ve met and especially by dad’s younger sister. Ruby is like your older sisters. She can say things I would never want to say. She is “in your face” (“Ruby’s Answer”), not like me. I see Ruby as that voice of the people, a mirror for women of both positive and negative.

The Ruby poems were written when I was in school, and people believed that I was Ruby. I was challenged by someone who told me that if I wasn’t Ruby, then write a poem in Ruby’s voice about myself. That is how “Ruby in Me” was born.

CJ: One of your lines in “Ruby Awakens” is “I find myself without

memory.” Are you afraid that is what is happening to young Native Americans today, especially those raised in urban areas? Do you hope your work will help them reconnect to their heritage?

EB: Yes, there is a loss of connection. However, I don’t see it as a lost connection to memory, language and history. Once you acknowledge the loss and mourn it, you can go on. Yet young Native Americans in general aren’t going through the process of acknowledging that loss, which blocks their memory; and so they lose their connection. You can see this in Ruby. She awakens, and she is out of it. She comes down from her high and loses her connection.

Audience

CJ: Who is your intended audience?

EB: The Diné.

CJ: What would you like your readers to be aware of when reading your work?

EB: That I am one voice for Native people. Indian people have such different cultures, and I am Navajo, but I do not represent my whole tribe. Still, what I write is valid and legitimate as history.

Connections to other Native writers

CJ: Several of your poems remind me of other poems by Native authors. Your “Directional Memory” echoes “Washyuma Motor Hotel” by Simon Ortiz with the theme of the presence of sacred land in urban areas. “Jenny Holzer Inspiration” resembles James Welch’s “Plea to Those Who Matter” with the issue of not belonging because you are an Indian. And “First Light,” especially the part in italics, reads very much like Luci Tapahonso’s “Remember the Things They Told Us” with its emphasis on Navajo traditions. Were you conscious of these similarities?

EB: I am not familiar with Simon or Jim’s poems. It is inevitable to me that Native American poets would write on similar topics. You walk in the Anglo world for so long, and the rez is a long way away. Even here in Durango, there are not many Native people. That is why I am more comfortable in Farmington where I feel a part of the whole. Even growing up in Los Angeles, I was around so many other cultures that I was not the only brown face. I think our shared experiences as Native people re-

flects itself in our poetry with similar themes.

CJ: Do you read Luci Tapahonso? Have you met her?

EB: Yes. I met her very briefly here in Durango when she was speaking at a women's conference. I like her work, and it is not surprising that we tell the same stories since Navajo writers are connected through our tribe. I also like the work of Rex Lee Jim who writes in the Navajo language. Now that is inspiring.

CJ: Do you consider yourself a storyteller in the tradition of Native American storytellers?

EB: Yes, but it is even more personal for me. I am telling the stories for my children, for my family, to acknowledge my history as valid. The Navajo story does not stop with the Long Walk, and it is very modern for stories to be transcribed in written form. What I am trying to do is to document the history of a whole generation of people, to give voice to the once silent Native American. Navajo people are just starting to use the English language as our own, and I tell my stories in English. I am becoming more comfortable with public speaking and telling my stories, and I have had some amazing experiences. When you go to hear a storyteller, there are certain expectations. But I used to feel too young to be a storyteller. Once when I was speaking in Shiprock, I acknowledged to my elders who were in the audience that I was too young to be telling the stories to them. But I also realize that I am a voice that some parents don't have because my first language is English. Therefore, since I can speak to the kids, I am beginning to evolve myself as a storyteller.

CJ: In what ways did Simon Ortiz help you develop your poetic voice?

EB: Simon was a stepping stone to getting me out there and transforming me into a writer. He heard me as a student and helped me nurture my potential. He has never pushed me, but he has mentioned me to other people because he believed my writing could stand on its own.

CJ: What advice would you give aspiring Native American writers?

EB: There is so much room left for more Native writers. The field is open, and I don't see any competition among us. There aren't enough Native writers, and we need to help foster that voice however we can. There are lots of ways to open up Native history: prose, poetry, the screen, and I see my book as only one way of telling what it is like for Native people.

CJ: Who are your favorite writers?

EB: Maxine Hong Kingston is definitely a favorite. I took a class from her at Berkeley, and I was amazed at her writing and how well I connected to it. It was in my linguistics class that I got interested in Chinese, and I now see how lots of our histories are similar: the idea of migrating here, and the myth of Gold Mountain is similar to what was promised to Native Americans who relocated; our superstitions are similar although we have different types of ghosts; how we are viewed by the dominant culture is also similar.

Bless Me, Ultima by Rudolfo Anaya and *The Earth Did Not Devour Me* by Tomas Rivera are favorites, and I like Louise Erdrich, Gerald Vizenor, and James Welch.

When I read early Native American writers like Leslie Marmon Silko and N. Scott Momaday, whose concerns centered on the identity of their main character, I was not turned on. The relocation/migration stories are what fascinated me. In *Ceremony* and *House Made of Dawn*, there seems to be an unnatural focus on the drunken Indian. That is part of us, too, which is primarily a result of relocation and the introduction to the Anglo world.

The future

CJ: Do you still consider yourself an activist? If so, what are your causes now?

EB: Yes, you can't get that out of you. Now I am directing my energy towards my children's education. Sierra is in Headstart, and I am on the Headstart Policy Council for the Fort Lewis College Child Development Center. I want to be a part of the changes, because change is inevitable. My mom was like that. She was always a part of our education.

CJ: What projects are you working on now and do you hope to work on in the future?

EB: I am currently working on a new book of poems, and I am thinking about a fictional book. I am also working on starting a project where I would edit poetry by young Navajo girls. There are lots of good voices out there. There are women in Monument Valley who will help me do performance art with the girls. I feel that there is so much pressure on the younger generation that I want to help if I can. Writing saved me as an adult, but I feel younger kids need help earlier. Writing is a way they can accept themselves for who they are. My heart goes out to those young kids, and I enjoy working with them.

I have also looked at a PhD program at Stanford and a MFA program at UCLA. Cornell also looks interesting.

With this, Chamisa awakens from her nap, and Don and Sierra, ever patient, are ready to leave. Our conversation, an on-going dialogue which had begun several years before, had momentarily stopped. Esther the mother replaced Esther the poet, and she and her family went home.

I was exhilarated and, at the same time, let down. Esther and I had covered a great many topics, and she had allowed me, as a sort of coda to the orchestrated version of her life she gave readers in *From the Belly of My Beauty*, a brief entry into her private writers world. I loved being there. I relished the idea of getting to know the poet behind the poems, and I wanted more. Knowing Durango is only a resting place in Esther's journey, I regarded our time together as an occasion for me to bear witness to her work at this early stage as she continues to develop and refine her poetic voice.

Esther has left Los Angeles and come back to the Southwest, and she will move on again soon, closer to her destination. She has already established her voice among the best of the Native American writers, and she has many more stories to tell and many more poems to write. Esther is "in the cycle of the whirl. The circle to complete my journey. A Long Walk, perhaps battling new giants," (84) and we, her readers, await the poetic news from that journey.

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I Don't Speak Navajo: Esther G. Belin's In the Belly of My Beauty

Dean Rader

First encounter

I am always leery of a critical essay that begins with a personal anecdote. Typically, such forays into the personal lives of the author are thinly veiled moments of self-indulgence. And while I am certainly not going to claim that this essay is any exception, I have decided to throw caution to the wind and ask for the forbearance of the reader as I trace a very brief history of how I arrived at the work of Esther G. Belin.

In November of 1999, I had the good fortune to attend the American Literature Association's *Symposium on Native American Literature: Strategies for the Next Millennium* in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico. Unlike most conferences that greet its participants with sterility and tedium, the conference in Mexico offered more than sunny blue skies and a pleasant beach: it offered door prizes. What's more, these door prizes were not your typical toasters or coupons for discounts on cruises; these prizes were books. To be specific, they were books of relevance for the conference participants: books on Native literature, collections of poetry by Native writers and books in the area of Native American studies. The way the door prizes worked resembled a raffle. Each conference

participant's name was entered into a drawing, and toward the end of the weekend, the names were randomly assigned to a particular book. The books were on display for the entire conference on a table near the entrance of the room where all the sessions were held, so that not only were we able to see the books we dreamed might be ours, we were also able to see who had won what, since the winning name was affixed to the appropriate book. My own paper at the conference focused on several recent American Indian writers including Leslie Marmon Silko and Sherman Alexie, but in particular I talked about Navajo writer Luci Tapahonso. As it turned out, Tapahonso's recent collection of stories and poems, *Blue Horses Rush In*, was prominently displayed as one of the possible door prizes. Because of my paper on Tapahonso and because my review of *Blue Horses Rush In* had recently appeared in these pages, several people mused over the ironic possibility of me winning *Blue Horses*. Even I joked about the certainty of winning a copy of the one book I had gotten free that year. Guess which book I won?

Throughout the conference, I had been talking about Esther Belin with a good friend. While I had read some of Belin's work in a couple of anthologies of Native writing, I had not purchased (nor received free) her book. To my great interest, Belin's book *In the Belly of My Beauty* was also a possible door prize, and every time I passed the table, I would pick up the book and read a poem. As luck would have it, while checking my bags at the airport for the return flight home, I bumped into the winner of the Belin book. And there, in the dusky spaces of the Puerto Vallarta airport, few questions were asked, and amidst the ebb and flow of international travel and beyond the panoptic gaze of customs officials, the other winner and I made a furtive trade: Tapahonso for Belin.

The trade is, in fact, a curious one and invites any number of inevitable comparisons between Belin and Tapahonso. Both writers are Navajo women; both play with traditional notions of genre; both remain intensely interested in issues of identity and community; and both offer important and engaging insights into issues of gender. On the surface, it would appear that the writers offer an ideal comparative reading, that they beg to be read side-by-side. Indeed, in her book on contemporary American Indian literature, Susan Berry Brill de Ramirez pairs the two writers through a reading of poems about childbirth.¹ While Brill de Ramirez's commentary on the two writers is perceptive and useful, I would like to read Belin and Tapahonso against the grain by suggesting that we can learn more about Belin's poetics and Native American literature in general through an exploration of the *differences* in the work of two seem-

ingly identical writers, which is to say that perhaps we can broaden our understanding and expectations for Native poetry through a contrasting examination of these alluring figures.

But not very many people are as familiar with Belin as they are with Tapahonso, so before I leap blindly into a comparison of the two writers, I would like to explore the work of Belin herself, as her work demands to be read on its own terms. Toward this end, I would like to make a couple of claims that I hope the following essay will bear out. My intention, however, is that these assertions be read as suggestive and not authoritative claims. Claim one is that along with Sherman Alexie, Esther Belin is forcing readers to consider an important component of American Indian literature—Urban American Indian literature—as integral to understanding what it means to be an American Indian as we head into the new millennium. Claim two is an extension of claim one, in that, in order to write such a literature, Belin, a consummate innovator, creates a provocative hybrid poetry that coalesces urban and non-urban Indian gestures into one potent and resolute form of expression that broadens both urban and rural experiences. By contextualizing Belin among Alexie and fellow Navajo poet Luci Tapahonso, it becomes clear that Belin's work forms a literary and cultural bridge between the two figures. Indeed, Belin's fusion of literary and cultural motifs and thematic and formal gestures unfolds as fundamentally interrelated modes of private and public dialogue, a dialogue with her self, her cultures, other writers, and, most importantly, her readers.

Toward an urban American Indian poetics

One of the things that has distinguished Native American literature throughout this century and, in particular, since the "renaissance" of the 1960s, is the sense of place associated with Native writing. Scholars and other writers have rightly pointed out that unlike Anglo-Americans or even Asian Americans or African Americans, many Native Americans actually live on or near land that is sacred to them. Christians, Jews and Muslims have to travel to the Middle East to visit their holy sites and Buddhists and Hindus to Asia. But Hopi, Navajo, Chippewa and most other Native communities continue to inhabit or live near their homeland and their Holy Land; thus, much of the writing that emerges from these communities remains inextricably linked to the geographical spaces from which it was born. And as many readers of these pages deeply understand, most Native communities see their immediate landscape as interrelated with their notions of self. Self, land, history, spirituality and com-

munity make up one, integrated, indivisible circle. This is especially the case for Indians living in Navajo, Hopi and other “dependent sovereign nations,” but what about Indians living in Seattle, Dallas, Phoenix and Minneapolis? Is their immediate physical landscape part and parcel of their spiritual landscape? Is Reunion Arena sacred in the same way as the four Navajo peaks? Are the Starbucks as central to Hopi living in Seattle as Second Mesa is to those in Hopi? Indeed, when we think of geographical space and Native cultures, we (in particular Anglo scholars and teachers of Native literature) tend to think of so-called “natural spaces,” in which the individual or the community enters into a harmonious relationship with the mountains, rivers, canyons, deserts and hills that make up “Native” America. For better or worse, these assumptions, held by many Americans, come under fire in Krista Comer’s recent book on women, landscape and American literature.² In fact, she even takes Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony* to task for reinscribing what she sees as patriarchal images of the passive, service-oriented earth mother. Though I think Comer’s reading of Silko tends to ignore both the Laguna and matrilineal cultural nuances of Silko’s text, I am intrigued by the fact that Comer interrogates easy stereotypes about the relationship between American Indians and “nature.” For some time now, so much has been written on the healing properties of feminized open landscape and so little about how Indians exist and endure within urban landscapes that we may forget how real urban settings are for Native Americans. Not surprisingly, there are few models of how urban endurance might take place.

As a Navajo raised outside of Navajo, Esther Belin’s relationship with “nature” is problematic. For her, nature is Los Angeles, Berkeley, Santa Fe and Oakland—not necessarily the area around Shiprock. And though much of her writing is also about endurance, her landscape is decidedly urban:

And Coyote struts down East 14 feeling good
 looking good
 feeling the brown
 melting into the brown that loiters
 rapping with the brown in front of the Native American Health Center
 talking that talk
 of relocation from tribal nation
 of recent immigration to the place some call the United States

home to many dislocated funky brown.³ (3)

As in many of Belin's texts, I am struck by the presence of absence. Absent from Belin's poem is the harmony of nature, a healing landscape and a sense of connection the persona feels to the world around her. Instead, we find movement, politics, anger, hip language and self awareness—concepts that might be associated with Native American social activism but rarely linked with the most popular Native American poets. On the other hand, the poem does possess many traits of Native poetry, such as a sense of community and connection, a lack of punctuation, and a palpable orality (here created by its chatty, almost rap-like tone). Still, this is not the poetry of Tapahonso or Hogan or Miranda or Ortiz. While Belin's is a new voice that comes from a new generation, it also comes from a new place—the city. Like Sherman Alexie, Belin forces her readers to consider the experiences of urban Indians as important and even necessary components of contemporary notions of American Indian identity. Belin's experiences as an "urban Indian" and the meteoric popularity of Alexie raise meaningful questions about urban Indian literature and the urban encounters for Native Americans of all tribes. What exactly does it mean to write an urban American Indian literature? What does it mean, as a Navajo woman, to write in and out of an urban space? Any entree into this question involves an examination of urban literature in general and for Belin an even closer look at urban poetry. Since Dickens and Dostoyevsky, the dislocation and disjuncture of urban life has made for fertile literary grounds. In America, novels like Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* and works by Henry Miller, Jay McInerney, John Dos Passos, Bernard Malamud and Edith Wharton have painted various portraits of what it means to live in an urban setting—a setting often at odds with the ontology of American culture. But urban American poetry is scarcer. Perhaps our first urban poet was William Carlos Williams, but it was not until the beat generation and poets like Ginsberg, Corso and Ferlinghetti began writing "city poems" that the lyric, whose grounding has always been in either pastoral or interior settings, became linked with the frenzied, energized, fragmented milieu of the city. Of all of these poets, Belin resembles Ginsberg the most. Her interest in social and political issues, her engagement of the immediate, her conversational tone and her innovations in form evoke the wonderful mixture of passion and compassion that define Ginsberg's career.⁴ And like Ginsberg's relationship with Judaism, Belin particularizes her poetry through an unlikely marriage of urban and Navajo worldviews. Indeed, for all their urbanization, the poems remain fundamentally Navajo.

Thus, Belin accomplishes a truly unique feat—she fuses Navajo and urban worldviews without allowing her Navajoness to be colonized by larger, louder energies. To a certain degree the old adage holds true: You can take the girl out of Navajo, but you can't take the Navajo out of the girl. Even in her urban surroundings, Belin makes herself and her poetry become part of the landscape. She takes it in and takes it on.

Hybrid spaces: form, content, culture

Perhaps form most frequently and most dramatically demarcates urban from non-urban or pastoral poetry. Both Williams and Ginsberg explode typographical expectations, spilling lines and words across the page, attempting to replicate the sprawl and motion of the city through formal gestures. But these formal innovations not only underscore the relationship between the city's and the poem's architecture, they also mirror thematic concerns. This is true for Belin. Like a city, the poems move in different directions and possess unique dynamisms. A single poem might evoke the bustling reality of a downtown district but fade into the comfortable connectiveness of the Navajo reservation. Despite the fact that an urban environment is her home, Belin remains aware of her other home, the one two states and several states of mind away:

East

When the awe of downtown Los Angeles scratches my back
the ghosts of native brothers and sisters of this tropical climate seers
grade school, high school never told of their existence
Indian land was far away in another world, across state lines where
grandparents plant corn and herd sheep on a brown-eyed/blue-
eyed horse...

I always forget L.A. has sacred mountains. (9)

Here, Belin enacts a more dramatic version of the bi-cultural existence most Natives live with all their lives. She resides in one culture while longing for another, but yet feels totally at home in neither. No one has written more about this bi-culturality than Alexie. In *Indian Killer*, John Smith is unable to think of the house where he lives with his adopted white parents as his home. For him, home is the geographical location of his tribe and his biological parents.⁵ His inability to locate his heritage or his home is the major cause of his personal distress. Belin's nostalgia for

a sense of geographical and physical belonging suggests that for many American Indians (and for Americans in general) home is more than where one lives. Home is the source of a cultural ethos; home is the origination site of ethnic and geographical identity. Even though there are sacred mountains in Los Angeles, these mountains are not sacred for Belin. Her sacred peaks are in Navajo. Thus, she both lives in Navajo and does not live in Navajo, which means that her poetry resides in both worlds because *she* resides in both worlds.⁶

One of Belin's major themes in her book is being removed from ones world, and in particular, the persisting problems of relocation. Belin seems to link her own separation from Navajo with larger issues or relocation that many First Nation people know all too well. In the stanza quoted above, from the opening poem, "Blues-ing on the Brown Vibe," Belin incorporates the metaphors of relocation into the smooth groove of the poem: "talking that talk / of relocation from tribal nation." Here, ironically, relocation functions as a *unifying* principle, connecting the other "browns" at the Greyhound station. Likewise, the poem "On Relocation," gets at the issue with no romanticization of U.S. policy:

The physical is easier to achieve
a boundary drawn to separate people
Navajos say no word exists
establishing form to the air we breathe

This country's stem
relocation
rooted for invasion
imperial in destiny.

WORKING, MEN
IN PROGRESS

Stand and wait for crossblood babies
generic cultures blending new versions of red nations
brain-dead at birth from pollution ingested
umbilical cord of sweet grain alcohol and sticky TV diaries.

WHO IS TO SAY?
crossblood babies
relocated at birth. (11)

Postcolonial theorists from Homi Bhaba to Edward Said to Gayatri Spivak have suggested that indigenous people living in a colonial and/or post-colonial moment survive through notions of hybridity, grafting elements of both cultures onto each other to create a composite culturality. Scholars like Gerald Vizenor, Eric Gary Anderson, Helen Jaskoski and others have extended issues of postcolonialism to Native American studies, arguing that American Indians fully inhabit the world of the subaltern.⁷ Though Belin never uses the word “hybrid” or directly addresses colonialism, she remains painfully aware of Americas imperial drive, as evidenced in stanza two of the poem above. Belin intuitively knows what some who read American Indian literature through a postcolonial lens do not—that America has not moved to the “post” phase of postcolonialism. The colonizers have not left. They are still here; still trying to take Indian land, still attempting to limit Native sovereignties. As Belin suggests, America is still “imperial in destiny.” Her enigmatic but powerful reference to “crossblood babies” in the final stanza fuses issues of hybridity with issues of relocation. In fact, Belin posits that the hybridity babies will have to face is, at its core, an inherent relocation. Indeed, to a certain degree, though they have never themselves been removed from their land, many Indian children are born into a vicious cycle, a system of relocation.

Linked to questions about relocation and hybridity are questions of identity and cultural dwelling.⁸ Belin realizes that issues of identity are both internally and externally determined, for many mistakenly believe that the external mirrors the internal. According to Robin Riley Fast, issues of identity create both physical and emotional borders: “The depth and the multivalenced changeability of border experience derive from the fact that it is internal as well as external” (7).⁹ What’s more, as writers from Momaday to Alexie to Erdrich to Silko have suggested, because of centuries of both physical and psychological oppression, some Native Americans have internalized and continue to internalize the cultural assumptions of the world outside their own. Belin remains attuned to how people perceive her: how she looks, how she talks. She is also profoundly self-aware, so she knows that notions of identity are informed not only by interior characteristics, like how much Indian blood you have, but also by external characteristics like how brown your skin is, or where you grew up. And there are issues like the language you speak that bridge internal and external worlds. Belin’s poetry is an attempt to merge interior and exterior modes of signification; thus her poems do important cultural work both thematically and formally. What her poems signify thematically, they embody formally in terms of tone, diction, meter, and

in particular, how Belin arranges them on the page. As Belin herself suggests, “The struggle has always been inner and is played out in the outer terrain” (87).

In one of the more intriguing pieces, “Ruby in Me #1,” Belin ruptures traditional ideas of terrain and genre just as she ruptures traditional ideas of identity:

middle child
 smart child
 1/4 Navajo
 1/4 Navajo
 1/4 Navajo
 1/4 Navajo
 four parts equal my whole
 #311,990
 enrolled = proof
 50
 80
 100 if you can stand
 it
 veiled
 minority status
 alcohol
 resemblance (39)

The poem resembles a text by Williams or e e cummings or Susan Howe. In fact, the poem owes its form to collage artists like Kurt Schwitters and Jasper Johns and textual artists like Jenny Holzer (who Belin devotes a poem to) who blend visual and textual expressions. Like Holzer’s work, Belin’s poem tans on contentious questions about identity and gender. But this poem most closely resembles Elizabeth Woody’s wonderful “Translation of Blood Quantum”:¹⁰

31/32 Warm Springs-Wasco-Yakama-Pit River-Navajo
 1/32 Other Tribal roll number 1553

THIRTY-SECOND PARTS OF A HUMAN BEING (103)

Though this excerpt is but a snippet, even in its brevity, Woody’s poem

gets at many of the same issues at work in Belin. Both women feel fractured by issues of identity and blood quantum. Exploiting the terminology of identity politics, both Woody and Belin offer a physical blueprint of the spiritual fragmentation engendered by the American cultural machinery.

Similarly, in what may be my favorite poem in the book, “Check One,” Belin plays, literally, with the varied connotations of the word “form” in an attempt to call into question official mechanisms of power and oppression. The entire poem follows:

Check ONE

- ☐ Diné
- ☐ Other

The minimalism of this poem is striking. Belin not only riffs on poetic form, she mimics the affirmative action “forms” we all have to fill out. For some traditional readers, this text may not appear to be a poem, since it does not contain even the most basic attributes of a lyric. But, this is the point of the poem: to resist expectations of form and genre is to resist larger Western imperial impositions. Similarly, in her poem “Ruby’s Welfare,” Belin once again plays with dual definitions of “form,” suggesting that form is a kind of metaphor for colonization or hegemony:

I smile
place my forms in the box marked
LEAVE FORMS HERE
black and bold
welfare is a luxury
place your form in our box
play by our rules (43)

For Belin, form literally equals content, yet she subverts easy classifications of people based on the external signifiers of race or class. Indeed, in “Check One,” Belin reverses traditional notions of otherness. For the voracious American colonizers or the Spanish missionaries, the Diné are other. But Belin inverts the imperial model that denotes otherness. Hegemony is tipped on its head. Though Belin suggests that if the reader cannot check the Diné box, then s/he is other, it becomes clear that Belin

could check both boxes simultaneously. She feels both Diné *and* other. She may dwell in both worlds, but these worlds and her place within them remains, like her poetry, always in flux. Torn between the lure of the spectacle of capitalist American popular culture embodied by its cities and the lure of the sense of belonging that comes with the family, friends and geography of Navajo, Belin enacts a poetry that allows her to inhabit both.

Belin is able to inhabit both Native and Anglo cultures because she is comfortable inhabiting both oral and visual cultures. An increasingly important aspect of American culture—one that almost never gets discussed in books and articles about American Indian poetry and fiction—is visual culture. Silko has been mindful of both textual and visual signification for some time. In her introduction to *Yellow Woman and the Beauty of the Spirit* she writes, “I see no reason to separate visual images from written words that are visual images themselves” (14).¹¹ Perhaps more than any other Native poet, Belin understands the degree to which written texts are also visual texts. Her awareness of the formal or visual aspect of her poetry no doubt derives from being assaulted by and internalizing visual culture. Most scholars of Native American literature read Native texts through a dialectic of textual and oral cultures, but for Alexie and Belin, American visual culture has influenced and continues to influence their work in profound ways.¹²

Alexie remains troubled and angered not only by the representation of Indians in pictures, cartoons and in films but also by the absence of Indians in the visual media. The fact remains that we don’t see Indians—we don’t see them on the news, we don’t see them on MTV, we don’t see them in GAP ads, we don’t see them on *Late Night with David Letterman*, we don’t see them hanging out in Central Park on *Friends*.¹³ Belin is not only interested in how Indians are perceived but how Indians (and she) perceive(s) the world. Lyotard claims the world comes to us in stories, but for people of Alexie’s, Belin’s and my generation, the world comes to us in images. Throughout the book, Belin interrogates how things appear or how she sees America. For instance, in “949 Agua Fria,” she begins the poem “O Today I see the way it is” (51), and in “How Art Opens Ruby’s Eyes,” she emphasizes the dual act of seeing and seeing how Indians are seen. Similarly, in “He Changed the Whirl in My Palm,” Belin links seeing with revelation and articulation: “show me / how to see / a bird on a face” (7). What is truly engaging about Belin’s poetics, though, is how her interest in perception, thematically, gets represented formally. Belin seems to have internalized Marshall McLuhan’s claim that the medium is the message, for her poems formally embody what

they evoke thematically. In “Jenny Holzer Inspiration,” she takes on the Holzerian role of transforming the textual into the visual. And, to suggest cultural absence, in both the Holzer-inspired poem and in “How Art Opens Ruby’s Eyes,” she leaves certain spaces blank: “I will remember/ White “ _____” (10) and:

Invited to see art through native
hands more than image
of you drunk
-en
greasy _____ (35)

Without question, Belin’s use of visual space reinforces her thematic interruptions of American cultural space. The lines are disjointed, and the spaces the poems take up on the page suggest design without an imposition of order. Like so many other Native texts, her poems refuse conventional linear movement; they move horizontally as well as vertically. Most importantly, they create visual images in the mind of the reader. They demand to be read as materials of visual culture, as they are themselves overtly visual texts. Critics may be tempted to discount Belin’s poetry because it does not evoke or describe a traditional Native landscape, but my point here is that Belin’s urban poetics reflect as sophisticated a sense of visual landscape as a writer living in Navajoland. Furthermore, her use of visual space and visual culture reveals an even more complicated level of hybridity. She weaves oral, textual and visual cultures into one imaginative mode of expression—an expression that is not merely textual or visual or oral but a unification of all. In the best tradition of Native expression, she creates unity without conformity.

The eternal return to Navajo or Navajo twinning: Esther G. Belin and Luci Tapahonso

“Navajo writers such as (Luci) Tapahonso, Francisco, Walters, and Belin write from and of their own lived experiences which are informed by their cultural heritages,” or so says Susan Berry Brill de Ramirez toward the beginning of her section on Tapahonso and Belin in *Contemporary American Indian Literatures and the Oral Tradition*.¹⁴ In her examination of two poems, one by Tapahonso and one by Belin, on the experiences of childbirth, Brill de Ramirez goes on to posit that “the worlds of [Tapahonso, Francisco, and Belin] conversely conjoin the worlds of their lives, the worlds of their people (the tribal reality of the Diné) today,

historically, and into the future, and within the timeless world of the sacred.”¹⁵ Few people would argue with Brill de Ramirez’s assertions here; in fact, her reading of the poets and their intimate connections to the present, past, history and the sacred is a sensitive and sensible interpretation of their work within Navajo cultural nuances. I would like to suggest, however, that the experiences of Belin and Tapahonso can be quite different from each other and that the tribal reality of the Diné extends beyond the world of the four sacred peaks and into the frenetic urban scene of the city, despite those who would like to keep it isolated in Arizona and New Mexico. Brill de Ramirez would not make this mistake, but many people new to Native American literature tend to think all Navajo (and all Indians for that matter), share the same daily realities. While Tapahonso and Belin do share a tribal affiliation and a connection to Diné, their poetic and personal worlds remain distinct. Belin’s “own lived experience,” to quote Brill de Ramirez, is vastly different from Tapahonso’s because there is little doubt that Anglo urban environments have informed Belin’s “cultural heritage” and by extension her poetry. Not surprisingly, then, Tapahonso’s work, which seems to rise from the sand and water of Diné itself, feels like an entirely different country than the poetic landscapes of Belin’s poetry.

In the interest of time and space, I would like to offer a condensed and somewhat oversimplified blueprint of Tapahonso’s work in an attempt to situate Tapahonso’s poetics beside Belin’s. For several years, Luci Tapahonso has been writing some of the best poetry of any American writer. Her book, *Sáani Dahataal, The Women are Singing*—a compilation of poems and prose sketches that vividly explore an individual within the contexts of a supportive and inspirational Navajo family and community—links personal poetic expression with tribal history and memory. Her cycle of poems and stories weaves the past into the present, the living into the dead, and the earth into memory. Oftentimes, her poems either invoke the Yeis, initiating a ritualized moment, or literally *become* rituals themselves. The Diné language frequently works its way into her poems evoking a bi-lingual, bi-cultural environment that becomes a metonym of Diné life in general.

As someone who has read Tapahonso for some time and has written on her on several occasions, I remain impressed and utterly moved by how quiet her work is. Indeed, hers may be the most tranquil poetry to appear in America since Robert Bly’s *Silence in the Snowy Fields* appeared in the ’60s. Her tone is reverent but accessible. She may write about ritual or prayer, but she also writes about making coffee, telling stories, eating, cooking and travelling to Texas, imbuing each with a tan-

gible holiness. She seems to inhabit, comfortably, both the sacred and the secular. Belin opts for an alternative kind of adjuration. Her poetry is not reverent, nor is it quiet. Where Tapahonso's poems tend to be ritualistic, prayerful, tranquil, and rooted in the rural reality of Navajo, Belin's poetry is loud, gritty, angry, urgently political and rooted in the urban reality of American cities. While both poets do share similar poetic and cultural sensibilities, in the most striking ways, their work seems to reflect the twin existences of American Indians—connection and displacement. In fact, on some level, Belin's and Tapahonso's apportioning of thematics and forms resembles the Navajo siblings Na'idigishí and Naayéé' neizgháni who divide their power to slay the most threatening monsters. Instead of seeing their work as a rending of Navajo worldviews, one might consider Belin and Tapahonso's poetry as a dual approach to slaying the various monsters that threaten both worlds. In the case of Tapahonso and Belin, their monsters come in the form of hegemony, racism, colonialism, misrepresentation, erasure and alienation, but both poets preserve and articulate the twin spectrums of Navajo life.

Equally interesting are how Belin and Tapahonso consciously and unconsciously contribute to the mainstream perception of American Indians through their own representations of Indians in general and the Navajo in particular. For instance, after assigning Belin's poems to one of my classes, I asked the students what they thought of them. The students liked the poems but were perplexed. One woman responded that she was moved by Belin and her work but was a little disappointed that the poems weren't more "Indian-y." I received similar responses when I gave some colleagues in other departments a couple of Belin poems. They found them "interesting" and "political" but no one seemed to connect these traits with Native discourse. On the other hand, when the students and my colleagues read some Tapahonso poems that I gave them, they seemed *relieved*. Tapahonso's work embodied the tone, the aesthetic and the thematic they had come to expect from Native American art. Indeed, Tapahonso's use of Diné, her reverence for tradition and nature and her invocation of ritual and performance denote and embody "Indian" discourse—or at least what most Anglos (and other minorities for that matter) imagine or want Indian discourse to be. Belin seems less "Indian" because she assaults stereotypes from all angles. In brief, she is forcing readers to change how they see urban Indians. Belin and Tapahonso make a great pair not only because they both write poems about childbirth but also because together they represent the complexity of the dual existence of American Indians—urban/rural, political/prayerful, angry/restorative. They help complete a picture of Native American

experience that is always in danger of being incomplete.¹⁶

The poetry of Belin and Tapahonso do such good cultural work because both poets possess an amazing ability to transform the seemingly unpoetic into the wildly poetic. Tapahonso works most of her magic on the Navajo reservation. She not only tends to set her poems in or near Navajo, she imbues them with a kind of local color that could never be mistaken for an urban backdrop. In "Hills Brothers Coffee," the uncle has clearly not wandered into Starbucks for a mochachino:

My uncle is a small man.
In Navajo, we call him, "shidá'i,"
my mother's brother.

He doesn't know English,
but his name in white way is Tom Jim.
He lives about a mile or so
down the road from our house.

One morning he sat in the kitchen,
drinking coffee.
I just came over, he said.
The store is where I'm going to. (*Sáanii* 27)¹⁷

Like many of Tapahonso's poems, this text functions as a mini story. Neighbors and family members wander over from the margins into the center of her poems. Conversations take place. Babies are named. Rituals are performed. Love is declared. Memories are revealed. Without question, Tapahonso establishes a setting. Even if the poem does not take place in Navajo, it retains traces of Diné through ritual, as in Tapahonso's beautiful poem, "Pacific Dawn," set in Hawaii:

Just yesterday, I felt her strength
brimming beneath the molten island.
I leaned over the rim of the black volcano
and sprinkled corn pollen, whispered a prayer:
I recall First Man and First Woman.
I recall the first perfect ear of white corn.
I recall the first perfect ear of yellow corn.
I recall the dust of my desert home. (54)

There are few, if any, prayers whispered in Belin's book. But then again, there are no whispers in early Ginsberg or Sylvia Plath or William Carlos Williams or Pablo Neruda or Yevgeny Yevtushenko. There are shouts, urges, challenges, and protests, and it is among these discarded emotions and the streets of West Coast cities that Belin transforms the mundane into the miraculous. Again, it all comes back to identity. Reading Belin alongside Tapahonso foregrounds important questions about identity. For Tapahonso, identity is rooted in Navajo; for Belin, identity is not rooted. Such is the case for Alexie—the writer who, despite the format of this section, Belin may resemble the most—who has been exploring this very issue since his first stories and poems. For Alexie, the most burning question remains: what constitutes Indianness? Even in his newest book, *The Toughest Indian in the World*, he confronts these issues. The “Cherokee-Choctaw-Seminole-Irish-Russian-Indian” professor of “One Good Man” keeps posing the following question to his class: “What is an Indian?”¹⁸ Belin's poems ask: What is a Navajo? And they force *us* to ask: What is a Navajo?

I'm not sure that Tapahonso's work prompts the same questions, for her work does an amazing job of creating and enacting a Navajo ethos. In a poem like “The Motions of Songs Rising,” poetry, history and ceremony merge:

This is the center of the night
and right in front of us, the holy ones dance.
They dance, surrounded by hundreds of Navajos.
Diné t'óó áhayóí
Diné t'óó áhayóí
We listen and watch the holy ones dance.
Yeibicheii.
Yeibicheii.
Grandfather of the holy ones. (SD 67)

The Yeis literally dance the world into existence through participation in the ritual. For Tapahonso and “hundreds of Navajos” surrounding the dancers, their participation in the ceremony transforms the experience into participatory truth. As the ritual renews itself, so are the Navajos renewed, and, as the third stanza reveals, the body of the Yeí dancer is also the body of the Navajo dancing. The scene Tapahonso paints is moving—the poem seems an “authentic” representation of a Navajo moment—the incantatory lines made more magical by the inclusion of Diné. But, what if a Navajo writer does not include any Diné in her poems? Is

her poetry also an authentic representation of a Navajo ethos?

In her autobiographical sketch "In the Cycle of the Whirl," Belin admits feeling an outsider on the reservation: "U.R.I.s. (Urban Raised Indians). We are city cousins. The one who didn't know how to ride. Or jump arroyos. Sometimes it didn't matter if you were fullblood because they knew you weren't from the rez" (*Beauty* 74). Because she does not have full access to Diné customs and geography, she wonders if she is any less Diné. According to her, experience and familiarity with custom becomes as important as blood. To this end, Belin offers a startling insight into notions of urban Indian identity: "I did not know being urban could be such a disability. A degree from UC Berkeley will never change the fact that I cannot understand my grandfather when he asks for more coffee" (*Beauty* 74). Tapahonso's poem about speaking to her uncle in Navajo while serving him coffee finds uneasy but appropriate resonance here, and again, we feel the uneasy presence of absence.

Clearly, Belin associates Navajo with a sense of identity. In poem after poem, she explores the degree to which she is Indian, Navajo, American. Some scholars of Native studies have argued that issues of identity are no longer relevant to literary studies, that Native discourse and the study and teaching of Native discourse must move beyond identity politics, but Belin suggests that for some American Indians, one can never move past issues that define one's sense of self and one's place within both immediate and larger communities. Can Belin retain an acceptable level of "Navajoness" in Oakland? In Durango? In Navajo itself? What is an acceptable level? For that matter, what is a Navajo? Later, in the same essay, Belin writes,

I don't speak Navajo. I feel it in my thoughts, flowing from my mind smooth as the wind. My enduring culture has absorbed me unknowingly while I was playing with giant anthills or helping to clean out the internal organs of a sheep. More than blood, my soul. (74)

While Diné as a language may not endure through Belin's poetry, Diné as a cultural presence will.

Coda: to the word "Indian": homeward: Belie and Alexie

Though Belin closes the book with her autobiographical essay/performance "In the Cycle of the Whirl," her final poem is an elegy, entitled "To the Word Indian":

Native struggle is worried and its back broke
 bending at the waist
 like a Social Security recipient and a Las Vegas whore

Slow assassination (*Belly* 64)

With its troubling portrayal of Native struggle, and by extension Natives in general, Belin's final poem recalls the final stanza of Alexie's equally troubling poem "My Heroes Have Never Been Cowboys." In this poem, Alexie, like Belin, remains disturbed by the inability of words to do what they should: "Arthur, I have no words which can save our lives, no words approaching forgiveness, no words flashed across the screen at the reservation drive-in, no words promising either of us top billing. Extras, Arthur, were all extras."¹⁹ It would appear that for these two young, gifted writers, the legacy they have inherited is an impoverished one. Where are the magical, healing words that restore one to his or her community? Alexie and Belin would lead the reader to believe that these words have been lost along with so many other aspects of Native life. But thankfully, neither writer closes their book with these texts. Alexie ends his book, *First Indian on the Moon*, with the title poem, a moving love poem that reconnects desire and love to the sense of promise engendered by his Native language:

I love you
 and I will say it in my own language
 I'll say it in the little piece
 of my own language that I know
 and I'll say it like it's the last thing I'll ever say
quye han-xm=enc, quye han-xm=enc, quye han-xm=enc. (*First* 116)

Like Belin, Alexie is aware of the fact that he is not as conversant in his "own language" as his elders. But he closes his poem on a note of optimism by returning—if not literally, then metaphorically and linguistically—home. Belin also understands that one's identity is rooted not just in a particular place but in particular actions, rituals, memories and in ways of seeing the world and talking about it. Interestingly, the last words of her book also find expression in italics, evoking a dual sense of being both special and spoken. These words, though written (or spoken) in English, do the cultural work of Diné. They evoke the complex landscape Belin has journeyed from and journeyed to. They take her to her

readers. They take her home:

The landscape of my writing will always focus on our struggles, from my memory what I witness in my blood coursing through my veins, and stories overheard in bar-talk. The will of my writing rises from *shimá*, as daily as her morning prayers in the gray hours. The hunger in my writing feeds from my journey homeward. (*Beauty* 85)

NOTES

- ¹ Susan Berry Brill de Ramirez, *Contemporary American Indian Literature and the Oral Tradition* (Tucson: U of Arizona P, 1999), 82-88.
- ² Krista Corner, *Landscapes of the New West: Gender and Geography in Contemporary Women's Writing* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1999).
- ³ Esther G. Belin, *From the Belly of My Beauty* (Tucson: U of Arizona P, 1999). Hereafter cited in the text as *Beauty*.
- ⁴ Perhaps it is no coincidence that so much urban literature is political. The root of politics, the Greek *polis*, has inscribed into it a duality of both urban and civic connotations.
- ⁵ Smith romanticizes what life is like on Navajo. In *Indian Killer*, Smith, who is unaware of his tribal affiliation, frequently creates scenarios of what life would be like for him and his healthy, functional family on the reservation. Though Belin does not indulge in the same kinds of delusions as Smith, she, too, romanticizes the bucolic memories and experiences of spending time over the summer with her Navajo relatives.
- ⁶ Kimberly M. Blaeser argues that American Indian writers, by default, write from a bi-cultural perspective: "The writers themselves have generally experienced both tribal and mainstream American culture and many are in physical fact mixed-bloods. Beyond this, the works themselves generally proceed from an awareness of the "frontier or border existence where cultures meet." See Blaeser, "Native Literatures: Seeking a Critical Center." *Looking at the Words of Our People: First Nations Analysis of Literature*. Ed. Jeannette Armstrong. (Penticton, B.C.: Theytus Books, 1993), 56.
- ⁷ See Karen Tongson-McCall, "The Nether World of Neither World:

Hybridization in the Literature of Wendy Rose.” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 20 (1996), 7, for an interesting reading of hybridity in relation to Native American poetry.

- 8 I am using “dwelling” in the Heideggerian sense here in that the word connotes not only a literal space in which to live but also simultaneously a personal and cultural space.
- 9 Robin Riley Fast, *The Heart is a Drum: Continuance and Resistance in American Indian Poetry* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1999). Also see Fast, 2-3.
- 10 Elizabeth Woody, *Luminaries of the Humble* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1994), 103.
- 11 Leslie Marmon Silko, *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit: Essays on Native American Life Today* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).
- 12 Jennifer Gillan has traced Alexie’s preoccupation with television and film, linking how people view American Indians today to how they viewed them in Westerns several years before. See Gillan, “Sherman Alexie’s Poetry.” *American Literature* 68 (1996), 97. For more Native texts that explore issues of Indians and the media see Thomas King’s *Green Grass, Running Water*; Sherman Alexie’s *Indian Killer* and *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*; Gerald Vizenor’s *Heirs of Columbus*; and James Welch’s *Indian Lawyer*.
- 13 While my goal in this essay is not an examination of representation, there are a number of good studies on the subject. For more information on the representation of Native Americans in literature, film and television, see Roy Harvey Pierce, *Savagism and Civilization: A Study of the Indian and the American Mind* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1953); Gretchen Bataille and Charles L. P. Suet, eds., *The Pretend Indians: Images of Native Americans in the Movies* (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State UP, 1980); Michael Huger, *American Indians in Film* (Metuchen, N. J.: Scarecrow Press, 1986); and most recently, Peter C. Rollins and John E. OConnor, eds., *Hollywood’s Indian: The Portrayal of the Native American in Film* (Lexington: U of Kentucky P, 1998).
- 14 Brill de Ramirez, 82.
- 15 Ibid., 82.
- 16 In fact, perhaps instead of reading the work of Tapahonso and Belin as entirely separate texts, we would be better served, as readers, to

begin to read their work as intertext. I am interested in Michel Riffaterre's and B. I. Leggett's definitions of intertext that actively involves the reader. In his essay "Intertextual Representation: On Mimesis as Interpretive Discourse," Riffaterre explains that intertext transpires when the reader unveils patterns or modes in the text unexplainable within the context of the poem. Hence, the approach most suitable for locating intertext, is the approach that enables the reader to produce both text and intertext. In other words, it is up to the *reader* to complete the incompleteness of the poem. A reader who knows the poetry of both Tapahonso and Belin creates her own intertextual interpretation of Navajo expression.

- ¹⁷ Tapahonso, *Sáanii Dahatal, The Women are Singing* (Tucson: U of Arizona P, 1993). Hereafter cited in the text as *SD*.
- ¹⁸ Alexie, "One Good Man," *The Toughest Indian in the World* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2000), 224.
- ¹⁹ Alexie, "My Heroes Have Never Been Cowboys," *First Indian on the Moon* (Brooklyn: Hanging Loose Press, 1993), 104. Hereafter cited in the text as *First*.

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Paula Gunn Allen's Grandmothers of the Light: Falling through the Void

Michelle Campbell Toohey

It's hard to enter
circling clockwise and counter clockwise moving no
regard for time, metrics irrelevant to this dance
Hoop Dancer 11(1-5)

As a politically involved writer, Paula Gunn Allen attracts a wide range of negative criticism, not only from the more traditional schools of theory but also from her own Native American contemporaries. Mando Sevillano discounts what he calls her ethnic approach to literature on the grounds that her definitions of ceremonial literature and sacred discourse are similar to strong traditions in the Western world and can be "explained with confidence by a non-Indian reader by using an archetypal mode of analysis"(6).¹ Janet St. Clair accuses Allen, who formerly chastised Leslie Silko for telling sacred Native American stories to whites in 1988, of backsliding by publishing these same stories in *Grandmothers of the Light* in 1991.² Furthermore, many anthropologists dispute Allen's tenacious

insistence that most Native American nations were gynocentric.³ Such a manipulation of facts, they suggest, indicates a fundamental dishonesty to bolster Allen's tribal feminist political agenda. Even her own tribal community questions if Allen is selling out their interests to the white gay and lesbian community by her association with this issue.⁴

Another group of critics targets Allen's construction of an essential Native American consciousness, suggesting that it misrepresents the lived experiences of contemporary American Indian life. Renae Bredin argues that Allen uses this Native American identity to appropriate material with which she has no historical tribal familiarity (43). Even more damaging is Gerald Vizenor's trivialization of Allen in *Manifest Manners: Postindian Warriors of Survivance* (23). Citing her use of the Crystal Skull as a metaphor for the return of women-centered spiritual power, Vizenor suggests that Allen's statements about gynocracy and visionary channeling are nothing more than an appeal to women who need to believe "that Literature is 'authentic,' the real, a source of presence" (22). Ultimately, for Vizenor, the questionable Crystal Skull purchased from Tiffany's of New York is a mere trope for the power, wealth, and dominance with which real Indians struggle.

Caught in the matrix of these conflicting views of Allen's discursive style, readers find themselves in Allen's "Horns of a Dilemma where the people of one brain / use it to shame the other brain. . . / they don't know there never was one side" (14-15, 19). If tribal and Western critical perspectives make such oppositional claims about Allen's writing, what contextual authority can be used to approach her works without further reducing them? Allen herself offers an answer:

I am suggesting a critical system that is founded on the principle of inclusion rather than on that of exclusion, on actual human society and relationships rather than on textual relations alone, a system that is soundly based on aesthetics that pertain to the literatures we wish to examine. ("Border" 310)

Readers must participate in the text itself rather than objectify it with irrelevant criteria.

Ironically, Vizenor offers further justification for such an approach as it applies to Allen's discourse: "There can never be 'correct' or 'objective' readings of the text or the tropes in tribal literatures, only more energetic, interesting and 'pleasurable misreadings'" (*Narrative* 5). The following analysis of Allen's discursive style in *Grandmothers of the Light* shifts attention from objective readings of Allen's discourse as a

boundaried political text to a more participative process of “pleasurable misreadings” that draws from assumptions of communal responsibility and connection. This shift from product to process enlists those critical perspectives that respect the text as multi-level, both literary and extra-literary.

In 1991 Allen published *Grandmothers of the Light: A Sourcebook for Medicine Women*, a cross-genre work that combines a highly politicized retelling of Native American stories with ritualized form. Unlike previous anthologies arranging myths in a linear structure, the discursive form of this particular literary text disrupts readers expectations and refigures their experience of tribal stories. As in her other oral and written discourse, Allen uses the intertextual, additive process that gives such depth to her work: the partial knowledges she uses to build holistic meanings. She now experiments not only with her appropriation of traditional tribal stories but also with the structural components of her form that complement a highly political narrative. Such experimentation develops a circularity that ultimately breaks down constructed audience assumptions, encouraging Allen’s readers to participate in alien perspectives.

In *Grandmothers of the Light* the boundaried text suggests to readers an anthology of stories, but the structure they experience includes multiple discourses found in such diverse genres as anthropological studies, metaphysical discussions, every day conversations, mythological storytelling, and postscripts combined to create a ceremony of what Allen refers to as “Myth, Magic, and Medicine.” These complex border crossings of multiple genres require readers not only to decenter many of their traditional expectations but also to become participatively lost in her ritualistic circling. Through a performative literature with no regard for rationalist principles, Allen develops a strategy that pushes her readers right over the edge of comfortable stasis and into the void she so carefully constructs.

To travel in Allen’s void is to fall through fluid, spiraling spaces in her literary style, an experience analogous to her story of Sky Woman’s creative descent into a world of her own making. In a dialogic retelling of Native American goddess traditions, textually Allen first performs her pivotal story “Grandmothers of the Light” and then circles it with other cross-genre writing strategies: Native American singing, tribal feminist speaking, autobiographical dreaming, debates with Western word men, and glossed tribal constructions. Then she recalls the thought and the meaning, how it flows through her ceremony, and she names the expanding ceremony *Grandmothers of the Light* after the circled story, honoring the original creative moment.

During this ceremony Allen chastises the Western desire to define experiences rather than to illuminate them: "It's so simple. The stories are told over and over. There were some women—sometimes two, sometimes three, sometimes more—and they did it" (57). By telling her stories over and over, albeit through a highly sophisticated textual structure, Allen draws her readers into the multiplicity they inherently resist, insisting that first they must recognize the limits of their own ideological traps.

Initially, many readers receive Allen's stories securely through the framing of her text and its familiar structure: the directive preface; the ethnographic introduction; the three sections of Native American stories, each complete with commentary and individual analysis; the anthropological postscript; the glossary; and, finally, the bibliography. Because our western constructs recognize a formulated book, we accept Allen's words about how simple this text is. We read her preface and thank her for the seemingly overt, open statement of her agenda, how she says she will tell us Native American stories in three sections because "for those raised in the rationalist world where the linear mind reigns supreme, distinctions are mighty" (5).

With our own rationalist academic expectations, we settle comfortably into the text as Allen conveniently summarizes the traditional stories, giving us immediate control; as she tells us her central issue is metaphysical; as she describes the bipolar, institutionalized values of individual good necessary for the societal good; as she assures us in her defined, hierarchical discourse that we, as sophisticated readers, are adequate to the task of understanding her text. However, just when we feel safe, she says "But magic doesn't follow the laws of geology, so who knows?" (xvi) and ruptures the discourse, makes it laugh and dance, deconstructing the exteriority we as readers have assumed. It is the interplay of dominant ideological discourse and Allen's ironic style in *Grandmothers of the Light* that unsettles us enough to expand our experience of multilayered, simultaneous meanings in a text.

Describing the appropriated versions of Native American stories by Native American women, Victoria Boynton suggests, "The traditional stories and their enunciative site are made manifest through the speaker's storytelling which potentially remakes the tale and retakes the body" (70). In Allen's manipulation of traditional tales, she does construct her goddesses with a contemporary purpose that belies a purely mythical perspective. Sky Woman was a medicine woman of such strength that she could fall through the void, ride the turtle's back, and continue in the shamanic ways of her life to a new place. Such an identity could describe Allen's literary process of taking back the cultural role of tribal

women. She might also claim an authorial sisterhood with Spider Grandmother as this creatrix thinks the world into existence, wishing to have someone with whom to share the songdream: "Not because she was lonely, but because the powers song was so complete, she wished for there to be others who could also know it" (35). Who is Allen as speaking subject? In Bakhtin's analysis she is one who understands that "literary style is a complex, dynamic system of linguistic styles" deriving "in terms of spheres of human activity" (65). Allen's speaking subject acknowledges communal responsibility in the creative process.

As speaking subject of her stories, Allen dialogues throughout the text, extending the spheres of human activity to the non-human as well, privileging neither but foregrounding each as the process of illumination requires. Describing the Seven Ways of the Medicine Woman, she tells readers that "the living reality of the medicine world" is an accretive and simultaneous interplay of roles, that the individual must follow many paths to become a medicine woman:

During these years, she learns to manage her world. She must master a complex network of skills, meet competing and conflicting demands, and she must do this while contributing to her community through her labor and participation learning as she does so what her limits, needs and proclivities are and how to harmonized them with external demands placed upon her, achieving the powerful balance between inner and outer reality that sacred ritual depends on. (11)

Allen recognizes that one of the external demands placed on her is finding a way to dialogue with the discourses of the dominant society in which she participates.

Through the ceremonial, ritual discourse in her writing, Allen concentrates on that dialogue, exposing the inadequacies of establishing priorities and separating speech genres because she does not, as Barthes defines discourse, "consider works as mere messages . . . but as perpetual productions, enunciations, through which the subject continues to struggle" (43). The path of the wise woman does not lead to comfort; rather, she "has to be willing to forego pleasures and put herself in whatever danger and inconvenience her spirit guides require of her" (13). She must be an active agent who broadens her attention "far beyond that of her personal, private self and of her familiar group; her community extends to the stars" (15). Allen consciously chooses to dialogue cosmologically with all speech genres, including colonizing discourses, as her way of furthering the sacred work of the universe.

Allen's cross-genre writing is so compressed and tightly structured in *Grandmothers of the Light* that speech genres themselves can be discerned only by what Bakhtin calls the shift in speaking subjects (71). Her speech genres seem clear and definite as she calls on the authority of the medicine woman, literary critic, ethnographer, political commentator, tribal feminist, and psychic to signify them. However, the literary analysis of these genres as distinct categories is insufficient because, in the constant shifting of Allen's speaking, the question of caesurae that "break up the instant and disperse the subject into a plurality of possible positions and functions" creates a new dimension of irony (Foucault 69). Readers find themselves not only tracking an authorial subject who controls the discourse while being adapted to it, struggling within it, but they also take up that struggle by becoming Bakhtin's listeners-becoming-subjects (68). They look for knowledge about tribal consciousness, but they find an interrogation of their own Western consciousness.

In the Introduction to *Grandmothers of the Light*, an ardently academic discourse constructs Allen as an able participant in the poststructural debates about literature. In this part of her performance Allen argues satirically for the authenticity of her stories and medicine path, using the speech genres of academic criticism and theoretical debate to engage such theorists as Aristotle, Jung, Levi-Strauss, and the materialists. She refers to Greek etymology and says that myth is cross-culturally a ritual tradition. Her discussion of the transformational power of "muttering" and its origins echoes Foucault's defense of the madman and his discourse as she says: "Muttering, in which magicians frequently indulge, is an activity presently ascribed to the mad, the elderly, the female, and the powerless" (7). Foucault's words in "The Order of Discourse" could continue her argument: "On the other hand, strange powers not held by any other may be attributed to the madman's speech: the power of uttering a hidden truth, of telling the future, of seeing in all naivete what the others wisdom cannot perceive" (53).

If the insight in the madman's discourse is not perceived by others, wisdom, the material significance of the ritual tradition is also misunderstood. Following the poststructuralist path, Allen's discourse again ironically embeds an argument for the materiality of Native American mythology: "What are called 'myths' in the white world, and thought of as primitive spiritual stories that articulate psychological realities, are in the native world the accounts of actual interchanges" (6). If readers of theory have followed her poststructural argument carefully, they must now concede that Native myths are the material reality that Allen describes, or they are madmen themselves, which, of course, fits Allen's definition of

such theorists well.

In the area of psychic manifestation Allen describes contemporary shamanic practice as “‘dialing’ different gestalts” through which practitioners can bilocate in both the physical and spiritual world (19).⁵ Citing Western metaphysician Blavatsky, she also argues that symbolism contained in tribal literature is material in the Native American tradition in the same way Platonic understanding of original forms only reflects what Western consciousness interprets as physical reality (23). Again she has created a suspicious common ground with her non-Native readers by citing their own metaphysical traditions to illustrate her argument.

Now that Allen has convinced readers that she is adept at playing Western metaphysical games, she returns to her own agenda. Like Spider Woman, who can spin many strands together, she immediately follows the poststructural debate with the tribal story of Pretty Shield, an elderly Crow medicine woman whose knowledge is equal in power to any Western theorist. Again she disrupts rationalist logic with poetic, rhythmic discourse that draws the reader into the consciousness of “confusing the logical mind and compelling linear thought processes to chase their own tails, which of course is a major spiritual purpose behind the traditions narrative form” (5). Twenty-four pages into Allen’s book, readers leave behind any Western constructs of linear space and time and prepare to learn the gynocratic rituals of sacred power to which women like Pretty Shield will call them.

For Allen, gynocracy uses principles of egalitarianism and balance, valuing heterarchical and mutually constitutive creativity to achieve its goals. It is a system which, above all, sees the basis of harmony in the words Allen’s Changing Woman says to Sun:

If such harmony is to occur, then you must take my needs seriously and treat them with respect. My requests must be important to you. Every exchange between us must be equal. What I take from you, I give in equal measure. That is how it must be. (80)

In all of Allen’s retelling of traditional myths according to her gynocratic agenda, the power of discourse comes from a dialogic interdependency in the cosmos rather than from an elitist attempt to control. She will often return to this theme, privileging cosmological necessity over the dominant ideology’s desire to colonize. Sun may be the perceived power of the universe, but, ironically, he needs Changing Woman more than she needs him.⁶ As the underlying principle of survival in the universe, growth necessitates interactive participation: the way of the medicine woman.

The first division of stories in *Grandmothers of the Light* begins with a section on Cosmogyny, Allen's coined phrase that promotes her political agenda. Allen again uses an anthropological, authoritative discourse tracing the roots of cross-cultural tribal feminism and the violence done to it by the patriarchal, monotheistic religious systems of the modern world. While she is bringing this ideological struggle to light with determined anthropological authority, she retains her disruptive discourse by referring to a pivotal story for her agenda of female multiplicity and centrality: the story of the male Little War Twins. Despite her previously researched thoroughness concerning other myths, her only validation for questioning the traditional male gender positions in this story is "Somewhere I was told that originally these twins were female" (29).

By rupturing her controlled, scientific discourse with such an unsubstantiated remark, Allen begins the process of problematizing any "true version" of the tribal stories, any authentic translation free from the valorization of language constructions theorized by Foucault: "We must rather recognize the negative action of a cutting-up and a rarefaction of discourse" (67). This primary cutting-up of the institutionalized Western discourse creates the space for the tension in Allen's performance.

In the introduction to her mythological story "A New Wrinkle," Allen discredits the concept of authentic translation entirely. To introduce her first tribal story she chooses her patriarchal, Anglo-American ancestor John Gunn, whose position as translator she has found problematic in other places (see *Sacred Hoop* 225), letting him tell readers about the supreme power and might of the Thinking Woman. She follows her uncle's observations with the remarks of one Hamilton A. Tyler, who answers John Gunn: "However lofty a conception of this goddess may be, it seems that when she has a form it is that of a spider" (33). We now have two rationalized constructs of Spider woman in the tribal story: one of a powerful, lofty figure and one of a distasteful, trivialized insect.

The positioning of these two responses with Allen's Spider Woman who recognizes neither of their "truths" (she shares the power, creating a pattern of cosmological movement) is another example of what Allen has previously referred to as tail chasing. In Allen's version of "A New Wrinkle," Spider Grandmother repositions the creative dynamic of power dialogically: "For she and the power were together and of one mind. They were two, but they were the same thing. . . . She sang the power that was in her heart, the movement that is the multiverse and its dancing" (35).

The cross-cultural retelling of Native American stories from a West-

ern ideological base problematizes translation even further: if the discourse of Native American cultures is performance oriented, but the articulation of that performance must be framed in a discourse developed along production lines, how do Western value systems disrupt ritual performance? Readers must now question what kind of violence their constructs bring to the following stories, even as Allen acknowledges how her own agenda in telling the stories makes them relative and particular to her language and purpose. Now not only the author struggles inside the text but so do the readers as well.

By beginning *Grandmothers of the Light* with the symbolic language of a Western discourse inadequate to her tribal consciousness, Allen storytells in a powerful way what she says elsewhere about the limitations of English in relation to her Laguna thought structure: "I just use what little understandings I have of actual words, or concepts, and then I keep working them out, and working them out, and working them out" (in Ballinger 9). Her answer to the violence perpetrated by the dominant discourse, which is also her discourse, is to enter it and transform it with the performative power of thinking, spinning, singing, storytelling, and dancing.

The stories in the Cosmogyny section tell about working the concepts out. In this working out, Allen uses a number of different genres, ranging from the retelling of traditional creation myths to the dialogue of the two modern goddesses in her title story "Grandmothers of the Light" to the feminist exchange between Corn Woman and Sun in "Making Sacred, Making True." Allen's discursive style in this section crosses textual and temporal boundaries with agility. We become aware that the conversation in the cafe at Berkeley is the same conversation between Changing Woman and Sun, the same conversation between Montezuma's brother and Tonatihu, the same conversation women have with lovers at the breakfast table every morning before the end of the world. This conversation addresses her feminist tribal concerns about the centrality of the goddess in cosmogyny as necessary for the continuance of the people. The multiplicity of her style operates on a dialogic level, inviting readers into a conversation that continues in the following ritual steps of the ceremony.

In the section "Ritual Magic and Aspects of the Goddess" the multiverse replaces the universe: goddesses are multiple, storytelling is multiple, reality is multiple, discourse is multiple. Allen says: "As the multi-intelligences think in relationship contexts, ritual magic operates" (107). She further tells the readers that ritual is three-legged, performing thinking, relationship, and change in a tripartate ceremony of the void or

Great Mystery, which is “not an object but a period; it consists of events. The events have neither beginning nor end” (107). Again we see a discourse of ritual that is open-ended, making the inherent power one of transformation rather than colonization.

But in the stories of this section, Allen underscores that sacred power has its price. She ritualizes women’s participation in terms of responsibility, storytelling again that multifaceted goddesses have their tasks; that, at times, their roles must be adversarial; that their *wakan* must be respected; that they must lose the ones they love to regain them; and that, ultimately, their isolation, their sacrifice, and their attendance to balance will cosmologically transform the earth: “After a proper length of time planning and dreaming, discussion and surmising, mumbling and wondering had gone by, the people settled into strategy” (119). Allen’s discourse now prepares the way for the final ritual of ceremony in “Myth, Magic, and Medicine in the Modern World.”

The internally dialogic nature of *Grandmothers of the Light* is a ceremony of abundant participation. Readers become aware that the discourses of stories fan out; the retelling is additive rather than linear. They also realize that time is achronological and that the “singular in reality does not exist” (107). Bakhtin says that “the utterance proves to be a very complex and multiplanar phenomenon . . . various viewpoints, world views, and trends cross, converge and diverge in it” (93). In *Grandmothers of the Light*, Allen extends the multiplanar to include an interplay of conscious and subconscious levels and says that the purpose of ceremony is to integrate these various orders (5).

Allen’s performance takes place in the “shadowland” of her own ethnicity where her tribal and Anglo-American consciousnesses construct a woman who says: “So you see, my method is somewhat Western and somewhat Indian. I draw from each, and in the end I often wind up with a reasonably accurate picture of truth” (*Sacred Hoop* 7). As a Native American woman of mixed heritage living in an American society of cultural diversity, Allen recognizes that ritual must shift to adapt to the modern world, that “a living thing changes as energies within it change, and inner energies change as external conditions (another way of talking about energies) change” (*Grandmothers* 165).

In her last tripartate retelling of myths, magic, and medicine, she offers ritual thought, power, and transformation as the energies that can disrupt the proclivity of modern society to destroy life-forms. Tonantzin appears to Juan Diego and is linked to the Western Blessed Mother, not by an act of appropriation but by contributing to a more multiplicitous iconography in a modern society needing new faces of the goddess. To-

day the stone formation of the Giant's Face in "The Hunter" tells us that in our lives, with the help of Grandmother Spider, we can resist even the giants "strong enough to tear this mesa apart" (182). In "Deer Woman" we are reminded that the levels of consciousness are real and material, each one having rituals that must not be violated. Finally, in "Someday Soon" Allen creates the space for the ritual that will ultimately destroy the old paradigm of subject and other still serving ideologically to bifurcate modern society. This ritual will teach the modern world that another position exists, another story can be told.

Haraway describes how multiple perspectives create new models of communication in the following way:

The focus is on how these discourses make possible figures of critical subjectivity, consciousness, and humanity—not in the sacred image of the same but in the self-critical image of "difference," of the I and we that is/are never identical to itself, and so has hope of connection to others. ("Actors" 25)

In Allen's story "Someday Soon" she addresses this critical subjectivity of valuing difference not in dualistic terms but in terms of what Patrick Murphy calls otherness, which says: "Otherness proceeds from a heterarchical sense of difference, recognizing that we are not ever only one for ourselves but are also another for others" (*Literature* 152).

Throughout *Grandmothers of the Light*, Allen has refused to tell stories in terms of the constructed self and other that Western ideology has used to colonize Native American peoples and their cultures. In her ritualized writing, her readers discover the position of an otherness, a relational space that assumes the necessity of people to live not only with the multiplicity of their own conscious and unconscious selves but also with this multiplicity as it exists in relation to ceremonial participants (Murphy, "Possibility" 7). Allen sees this diversity as a strength, an opportunity of transformative reciprocity basic to tribal consciousness. In response to modern needs this reciprocity welcomes the return of gynocratic society as survival: "The women and men of Native America are busily rebuilding their traditions, and the one most in need of rebuilding at this time is the way of the mothers and grandmothers, the sacred way of women" (*Sacred Hoop* 188).

In "Someday Soon" Crystal Woman, a medicine woman, is waiting for the time of this return to be ripe: "It was in the time of the end, of the transformation from this, that she was, to another thing" (196). As Allen tells the story of Crystal Woman, her discourse becomes fragmented,

rhythmic, and repetitive so that readers have to enter into it as participants responding to the irregularity of the language. Crystal Woman as subject is split into thirteen medicine women not through a linear, signifiable structure but, rather, through the repetitive, circling movement of the medicine path. When the medicine women come out of the void, time becomes completely achronological and ahistorical, "the fullness of time," where they are old and young, simultaneously past and present (197). This process of accretion transforms them into the crystallizations who wait for the time of the human beings to begin the shamanistic cycle again.

In this retelling of the Native American myth, Allen says she is directly channeling the words of this Crystal Woman, a personification of sacred otherness whose skull will "restore the link between the world of the immortals and the world of the human beings. And time sunk deeper into the green" (199). The subject is multiplicitous, dialogic in its source, waiting for Dawn Light Girl in the lost cities of the lost tribes to become the Otherness linking "the builders of the old times and the workers of the new" (200). Dawn Light Girl personifies the model of participation that Allen possibly offers to her readers.

At this point in the story Allen's discourse again circles back on itself as she gives two nonvalorized renditions of the skull's retrieval:

It is said the Indians were joyful. . . It is said they were unhappy, stricken that their crystal was thus exposed. . . . It is said the people tried to keep it, but the white man refused . . . It is also said the headman said to the people, "I cannot take this with me. You must keep it because it is yours." (200)

In the story of Dawn Light Girl/Sun Woman, we have the connection between the goddess and humans made by a maiden who is never defined ethnically, whose status as goddess or woman is blurred, a young woman who occupies the relational position that recognizes the constructive power of the discourse in storytelling itself. Her role in the ceremony is relational only; that is all we can materially say about her, except that she grows old and is present to the two men who make their way to the crystal skull in 1987 and prepare for the return of the Goddess in "the fullness of her being" (201). Readers fill in the gaps Allen creates with the interplay of her text. They surmise that the young woman walks the medicine woman's path as she goes from Dawn Light Girl to Sun Woman, but their experience of her sacred power can only be simultaneously exterior. They are only beginning to make their way to the Crystal

Skull.

Textually, the tribal stories are now ended, but Allen has one last story to retell in the postscript, glossary and bibliography. In one sense she is the author returning to academic discourse, but, in a more significant sense, she uses these divisions of her book to position the readers once more in tribal consciousness as it relates to Western colonization. In *Sacred Hoop* she defines the connection between objectifying Native peoples and the earth itself: "Westerners have for a long time discounted the importance of background. The earth herself, which is our most inclusive background, is dealt with summarily as a source of food, metals, water, and profit while the fact that she is the fundamental agent of all planetary life is blithely ignored" (243). In her postscript to *Grandmothers of the Light* she discusses this privileging of Western materialism as not only damaging in a cosmological sense but also as a political strategy to distance and objectify Native people. As previously discussed, such backgrounding does not equate in tribal consciousness as a negative, but in real political terms it is reductionary for both ecological and Native concerns. Allen further suggests that the portrayal of Native Americans as tribes with vast differences is another political strategy to separate the tribes in order to control them.⁷ Interestingly, she includes herself as one of the "sort of contemporary colonial front, following in a line that descends from soldiers and missionaries through Indian agents and traders to academics, anthropologists, folklorists, and most recently, literary specialists like myself (205). This contemporary colonial front has as its goal inter- and intra-racial dissension.

In her postscript Allen demonstrates that the Western assumption of racial privilege and division is fiction. She does this by anthropologically chronicling individual tribes cross-culturally rather than comparatively. She accretively invites participation from her readers one more time, telling the story over and over as it relates to all people, including the colonizers themselves: "It seems amazing to me that this magical stone, pronounced something like 'magi,' should have a similar function to the star the wisemen followed to Bethlehem" (207).

Allen is able to reposition the background of the people, human and non-human, telling us that foregrounding is relational to the needs at the time rather than the result of some inherent privilege. In *Grandmothers of the Light*, her ceremony attends to the needs of its participants whether those needs are for myth, definition, postscript, glossary or bibliography. In her text she refuses to privilege any speaker/listener over another because her tale is about:

how a people engage themselves as a people within the spiritual cosmos and in an ordered and proper way that bestows the dignity of each upon all with careful respect, folkish humor, and ceremonial delight. It is about how everyone is part of the background that shapes the meaning and value of each persons life. (*Sacred Hoop* 244)

Allen has effectively decentered Western notions of power by reconnecting humans heterarchically to their environment.

In the pivotal story "Grandmothers of the Light," Allen tells about the Mayan tribal presence. In "Someday Soon" she retells the story in the presence of Crystal Woman as the closing ceremony of the mythical ritual. Again in the Postscript she narrates another ending about the Mayan, "the most singular of all the people," whose classical age lasted longer than that of the Greeks and whose economy, though simple, drew strength from a sophisticated mathematical, spiritual, and aesthetic culture that had no need to exploit the environment. By now readers are beginning to know how to participate in the ceremony, and, although they hear with Allen Sister Conrad's words that the Maya have disappeared, they remember Crystal Woman and the prediction that in the mid twenty-first century a new age of peace and harmony will come. They sense where to walk in ritual awareness, awaiting the return of the goddess. So they listen to what the Mayan chant has to tell them, channeled through Allen's final words: "I hope that this volume will aid in the process of return, enabling women to recover our ancient medicine ways and once again establish our ongoing relation to the Great Mystery. *Nos vemos*" (233).

To return to the critical analysis of Allen discussed in the beginning of this discussion, I would answer many of Allen's detractors with one of her own poems, "Snowgoose":

I have seen in picture how
white the bulge of the glacier
overshadows the sea,
frozen pentecostal presence,
brilliant in the sun-
way I have never been. (5-10)

Never the frozen pentecostal presence that critics try to make her, Allen's discourse is not about close readings, anthropological accuracy, or reified social commentary from Western perspectives. It is not even about fulfilling the political and literary expectations of other tribal members.

Rather, it is about the completion of a ceremonial healing that takes risks, contradicts itself as it grows, and ruptures prescriptive, boundaried language that, while brilliant in the canonical sun, misses the potential for transformation in the nuances of the shadows. Allen validates the participation of her readers: "The true joy of a story session is taking the stories home to reflect on, to apply some of your own experience, to learn and grow from, to share with someone else" (*Voice* xii). Feminist dialogics at its best.

NOTES

- ¹ The term Western is used to denote current eurocentric theories in opposition to theories from other traditions such as Native American.
- ² St. Clair cites Allen's complaint at the 1988 MLA convention that Leslie Silko had violated the tribal privacy of Laguna spirituality by including sacred stories in *Ceremony*. Allen defends publishing many of these same stories in *Grandmothers of the Light* three years later by simply saying "The time is right" (in St. Clair 84).
- ³ Elizabeth Hanson in her book *Paula Gunn Allen* cites Robert Berkhofer and Fancis Paul Prucha as two "gifted historians" at variance with Allen on this issue of the Native American tribes as typically gynocentric (16). Allen's own Keresen-speaking Laguna Pueblo is accepted as matrilineal and matrifocal, however (7).
- ⁴ For further discussion of this topic Vanessa Holford cites from *The State of Native America: Genocide, Colonization, and Resistance* by Annette M. Jaimes and Theresa Halsey.
- ⁵ Allen's use of the term shaman can be somewhat confusing although it seems appropriate here. According to Andrew Wiget in *Native American Literature*, Allen's tribal heritage of the Southwest relies on the more formulaic systems of the neopriestly tradition of Mesoamerican origin with its formal training and elaborate system of chants and symbols. The priestly tradition tries to connect to a prototypical event. On the other hand, the shamanic tradition which "occurred throughout North America as the dominant mode of religious experience" tries through physical ordeals and solitude to recreate a state of consciousness rather than an event (30-32). Allen's medicine woman seems to be a composite of the two traditions as

she has the ability to experience other states of consciousness but uses ritual-based magic in a communal setting.

- ⁶ In Navajo ritual Changing Woman was impregnated by sunlight and water, both of which are central to ceremonial life. Allen's deletion of water as co-creator suggests a feminist agenda interrogating contemporary power struggles between male and female gender constructs.
- ⁷ Many Native Americans disagree with Allen on this point, suggesting that tribal diversity must be stressed rather than minimized.

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“It is ours to know”*: Simon J. Ortiz’s *From Sand Creek

Robin Riley Fast

In *From Sand Creek*, Simon J. Ortiz bears witness to the November 1864 massacre at Sand Creek of peaceable Southern Cheyenne and Arapaho people, to the ongoing psychic assaults upon American Indian peoples, and to the use of the ideologies of Manifest Destiny and European superiority to implicate non-Native Americans in this history and its consequences. In doing so, he at once unsettles canonical American history, by bringing the lives and deaths of the dispossessed back from the margins of the story to the center, and announces a new American dream of “love / and compassion / and knowledge” (95). A key element in his multi-layered witnessing is Ortiz’s focus on contemporary patients at the Fort Lyon Veterans’ Administration Hospital, where he himself has spent time in treatment for alcoholism (Wiget 8). Since the vets are apparently of diverse ethnicities, their experiences can be seen as reflecting and continuing the histories of both Natives and non-Natives. And Fort Lyon is part of the history of the Sand Creek Massacre: the Indians had been camped at the fort prior to being sent to Sand Creek; the massacre was carried out by troops from Fort Lyon, led by Colonel John Chivington, a Methodist elder.¹ For Ortiz, Fort Lyon thus inevitably incites memory and witnessing.

Recollecting and re-imagining history, Ortiz speaks as a witness to the past (the massacre) and the present (his own and other vets' lives, which he claims continue the story of conquest represented by the massacre), and demands that his audience witness by listening to and acknowledging these histories. This expectation of the audience, which parallels Don Laub's description of witnessing as a joint endeavor, is consistent with the ethics and aesthetics of the oral tradition in which Ortiz's work is grounded—a tradition in which a responsive audience's participation is essential to the story's meaning and continuity, indeed to the survival of the community of storytellers and listeners. Ortiz has voiced these convictions many times. "Without this sharing" by speaker-poet and listener-reader,

in the intellectual, emotional, physical, and spiritual activity, nothing much happens. . . . [T]he listener-reader has as much responsibility and commitment to poetic effect as the poet. When this effect is achieved, the compelling poetic power of language is set in motion toward vision and knowledge. (*Woven Stone* 151)

And this shared responsibility is necessary to survival. That is to say, storytelling, in whatever genre, is action: "The only way to continue is to tell a story and there is no other way" (*Woven Stone* 153). Discussing the witnessing of Jewish Holocaust survivors, Laub similarly states that "It is the coming together between the survivor and the listener, which makes possible something like a repossession of the act of witnessing. This joint responsibility is the source of the reemerging truth" (85). Thus, he continues, "testimony . . . is a dialogical process" (91). Further, "repossessing one's life through giving testimony is itself a form of action, of change" (85).

The storytelling and listening community Ortiz would evidently like *From Sand Creek* to create or inspire is nothing less than America itself. After introducing the book as "an analysis of myself as an American, which is hemispheric, a U.S. citizen, which is national, and as an Indian, which is spiritual and human," he continues by defining it as, for Indians, "a study of that process which they have experienced as victim, subject, and expendable resource," while for European Americans, it is "a study . . . which looks at motive and mission and their own victimization." His hope is for mutual learning, which is necessary because, as he concludes, "We are all with and within each other" (Preface). (Because he often chooses not to characterize his contemporary veterans in racial or ethnic terms, I believe that this "all" can be read as even more inclu-

sive, without denying that the conflict Ortiz addresses has most fundamentally been between Native and white Americans.) Throughout the book he uses the word “America” inclusively, to focus his pain and indignation, but also his insistent hope. “This America / has been a burden,” but in the same poem he tells us to notice signs of spring.² Later he says, “You can’t help but be American, not a citizen or shadow but a patriot and warrior for land and people even when insignificant and lost” (38). Though the sentence’s end is ambiguous, its commitment is clear.

Ortiz takes on a difficult linguistic-political challenge in claiming America and prophesying a new America: naming and claiming “America” as such is, for an Indian, fraught with conflict. He shows us this conflict when he depicts his relationship with another veteran, a Texan “exile” who is evidently his subordinate in the ranks of VAH patient employment, but whose resentment forces Ortiz to reclaim himself by resisting the other’s language and power:

I am innocently American afterall
.....
but
it is the aboriginal
and the savage that cringes
under his murderous eyes,
and I have to move away
from the invisible gesture
of his hand reaching for my throat. (60)

Louis Owens, drawing on Bakhtin, calls attention to the conflicts inherent for Native writers in using English, with its unavoidable “history of assimilation” and its status as “authoritative discourse” that “strives . . . to determine the very basis of our behavior” (13). Owens and others often focus discussions of linguistic oppression on the highly contested word “Indian,” but “America” has analogously problematical implications. If “Indian” represents outsiders’ impositions on and erasures of indigenous people, “America” and its associated ideologies—because they represent and “justify” Europeans’ taking of the land—have similarly constituted efforts to determine and control, if not outright to destroy, the bases of Native behavior and identity. The history of the personal noun “American” also contributes to the potentially daunting blend of conflict and creative opportunity, for in claiming America, Ortiz is also simultaneously claiming his identity as an American, and revising the meaning of such a claim. “American” was originally used by Europeans to desig-

nate the Native inhabitants of the “new world,” but by shortly before the Revolutionary War, the term had been adopted, at least by English-speaking colonists, to define themselves and, explicitly or implicitly, to exclude the indigenous peoples.³ No longer designating racial others (“Indians”), it became a name with which to claim political difference from Europe—and to claim ownership of “American” land from the previously designated (but soon to be “Vanishing”) Americans.

From Sand Creek is moved by rage at this past and ongoing history, and by desire for an alternative to its stories most familiar endings: death, spiritual disintegration, loss of communal connections, marginalization—all of them parts of both Sand Creek’s legacy and the contemporary veterans’ lives. There must be some alternative to the massacre’s legacies, Ortiz tells us, if life is to continue. As his preface suggests, Ortiz seeks that alternative in commonality. Faith and desire, I think, enable him to imagine and claim common grounds among groups who can be seen as both opposed and related to each other. The book focuses on three groups of Americans: Indians, white settlers and other white historical figures, and veterans. Each groups history positions its members in complex relation to the others and to the prospects for an alternative, a new America, grounded in a vision of commonality.

Indians are primarily presented as victims of the 1864 massacre, hence as victims of the nineteenth-century veterans and settlers who enacted the ideology of Manifest Destiny; yet Indians are also among the contemporary veterans at Fort Lyon. Ortiz reminds us that settlers, whose land hunger led to and “justified” assaults like Sand Creek and other kinds of displacement, were to some extent pawns, manipulated by the powerful and their ideologies, specifically the Puritan conviction of being God’s chosen people, and the doctrine of Manifest Destiny. But he also reminds us that they were responsible for their own choices and actions: they weren’t simply encouraged by the ideologues and preachers of Manifest Destiny, but collaborated in its realization as, in the expansion of the U. S., settlers repeatedly pressed beyond treaty-established boundaries, then insisted on military support. Twentieth-century descendants, represented by the clerk in a Salvation Army store, continue such complicity. The contemporary veterans undoubtedly include descendants of both Indians and settlers, as well as of other American groups; as wounded survivors they can be considered victims of Manifest Destiny’s successor ideologies, especially the anti-communism that justified post-World War II American actions in Southeast Asia, with its similar claims to superiority and prerogative. By drawing attention to the vets damaged bodies and spirits, Ortiz emphasizes their lack of con-

trol and their condition as victims. But they may also be seen as descendants of the murderous troops of 1864, and as such they share complicity in history and their own condition: Ortiz exhorts us to "Remember My Lai" (15), and if we do, we will remember the innocent victims of contemporary American soldiers.⁴

The entangled identities, vulnerabilities, and complicities of Indians, vets, and settlers may be the truest and most painful basis for claiming commonality in *From Sand Creek*. The difficult complexities of commonality are suggested by sweeping indictments of white settlers, especially for their refusal to understand or acknowledge the meanings of their actions (75, 77, 89, 91), and by other signs of Indian rage, which is blunted or paralyzed inside the hospital, but powerfully alive, in image, memory, and spirit, outside those walls: "Indians stalk beyond the dike, / carefully measure the distance, count their bullets" (55). Ortiz's descriptions of veterans, settlers, and Indians expose the fragility of prospects for sustaining a sense of commonality, and the urgency of the need for the new America that is the subject of the hopeful prophecy with which the book begins and ends, the prophecy of a new America: "There is a revolution going on" (54); "The future will not be mad with loss and waste" (86); a new dream "wealthy with love / and compassion and knowledge will rise / in . . . our America" (95).

Ortiz describes the contemporary, hospitalized veterans as trapped in the Veterans' Administration Hospital and alienated from the outside world. The hospital is part of the problem, especially as it represents the ideology of U.S. imperialism—for its inmates literally embody some of the consequences of that imperialism—and the impulse to control the world (a characteristic also attributed to the settlers). The veterans' lives are ongoing disasters, shadowed by violence and a despair that is close to madness. If they are not literally silenced, their language reflects their precarious condition. One vet's "frozen tongue / is frantic with prayer" (13); another weeps as he plays the piano but is otherwise "mute" (69).

The settlers Ortiz describes as deluded: ignorant of the world they sought to possess, of the implications of their "progress" and their own complicity, and of the power and motives of the ideology (and its preachers) that encouraged them. Rigid in their beliefs, alienated from emotion, and willfully cut off from memory, they are "deranged" (65). Like the slaughtered or displaced Indians and the hospitalized vets, they are victims of betrayal: "Who stole the hearts and minds of the humble hardworking folk," Ortiz asks, "until they too became moralistic and self-righteous: senators, bishops, presidents, missionaries, corporation presi-

dents?" (50). This list reminds us that the betrayals continue into our present. But the settlers are also complicit: having stopped / and listened to Puritans" and "the Congress," they became "simple as death. / And, finally, complex liars. / And thieves" (51). These truths, too, Ortiz expects us to recognize in our present.

Unlike the veterans, who are often individually named or referred to in the first person, the settlers are always referred to in the third person plural, whether that be as "the humble . . . folk," by means of a list of European nationalities, or more often, simply as "they." And while the veterans, named or otherwise, are given vivid, particularized, physical and emotional contexts, the settlers are generally characterized collectively. Ortiz comes closest to an intimate evocation of settlers' experience when he suggests what their children lost by the parents' rejection of opportunities for connection with the land and the indigenous people (35). By drawing attention to refused or overlooked alternatives—what they "could have done instead"—he avoids the most simplistic claims of commonality among victims, and reminds us that settlers made choices, thinkingly or not, which in turn made them complicit in history.

The massacre and its ramifications are present in the straightforward recitation of facts, dates, names and numbers, in allusions to subsequent dislocations, deceptions, and violence visited on Indians, in powerful images of blood and dismemberment, and in the continuing resonance of these events in the present. Ortiz's very concrete and evocative language shows us that the Indians, both as a group and individually, are victims of violent hatred. Two poems (27, 41) allude to atrocities committed at Sand Creek, specifically the fact that soldiers cut the genitals from Indian corpses, as war trophies.⁵ Interestingly, Ortiz doesn't say this directly at any point in the book. The effect is to make these passages oddly opaque until one recognizes the object of "stuck them on their caps" (27) and "stuck them on their caps / to dry" (41), and sees, unwillingly, the scene of "several soldiers . . . expertly / at her / self her generations" (41). I think the combination of horror and indirection not only contributes to a sense of the massacre as the sum of innumerable intimate assaults, but also evokes the impossible task of the witness, to speak the unspeakable. Another poem overwhelms with its relentless imagery of blood, "bright and vivid," pouring "unto the grassed plains" (67). Ortiz brings the continuing inheritance of this history into the personal present in a poem of indignant but understated mourning for the stolen lives of Indians and dismay at the shame of feeling that being Indian makes one suspect as a potential thief:

At the Salvation Army
a clerk
caught me
wandering
among old spoons
.....
I couldn't have stolen anything;
my life was stolen already.

The clerk "caught" the speaker, perhaps Ortiz himself, as "Carson caught Indians, / secured them with his lies. / bound them with his belief." "Bound" in the beliefs of the colonizers, the speaker "reassured" the clerk, buying a sweater and then fleeing. His rage remains trapped in regret: "I should have stolen. / My life. My life" (53). As the poem plays on "caught" and "stolen," it subtly demonstrates that the doctrine of Manifest Destiny not only justified murder to take Indians' land, but also colonized Indians' perceptions and distorted their language. In another poem, we see that buying into the myth of divinely ordained conquest unsettled the settlers: when they reached California. "they named it success. / Conquest. / Destiny." But when "Frontiers ended for them" they were overtaken by "a dread" that became "Nameless / namelessness" (43). In such passages we see the psychic dangers for both Indians and settlers in accepting the authoritative, monologic language of dominance, the language of Manifest Destiny.

All of the white historical figures named in *From Sand Creek* are in some way associated with Manifest Destiny: Cotton Mather was a precursor; Chivington, Andrew Jackson, and Kit Carson were notorious "heroes" of the doctrine's triumph. The only other named white historical figure is Walt Whitman. "When I was younger," Ortiz writes, "—and America was young too in the nineteenth century—Whitman was a poet I loved, and I grew older. And Whitman was dead" (80). After this seemingly ambivalent introduction, the poem on the facing page tells us that Whitman "spoke for" the westward moving settlers whom he "thought . . . were his own," but who resisted his vision. "Did he sorrow?" Ortiz asks, "did he laugh?" (81). Whitman is a complex predecessor for Ortiz. His love for America, his desire for an inclusive comradeship, and his prophetic persona could all make him a positive precursor. And his love for the Civil War's wounded soldiers whose suffering he witnessed might also make him a sympathetic figure for Ortiz, witness to the precarious survivals of contemporary veterans. But Whitman was also an ardent

advocate of Manifest Destiny, not especially interested in Indians except as vanishing exotica or impediments to America's "advance." (See, for example, the "red squaw" passage in "The Sleepers," part 6, and "From Far Dakota's Caflons," which presents Custer's defeat at the Little Big Horn as the result of an Indian ambush.⁶) Whitman thus represents both complicity and commonality. To some extent his presence might represent Ortiz's search for a sympathetic connection to white Americans, and the tensions or contradictions inherent in such a project.

Like Ortiz, Whitman yearned for a responsive, participant audience. Both complicitous in some of his age's dominant ideologies, and aspiring to transcend conventional limits, he might in a sense represent Ortiz's nonNative readers. This brings us to the question of how Ortiz prompts his readers to respond, and to become witnesses. Ortiz addresses us directly, using the imperative: "Believe it" (11); "Remember My Lai"; "Remember Sand Creek" (15). He questions and challenges us, reminds us that ignorance can't exculpate us fully (if at all) from the consequences of our acts. As he refers to the alternatives that settlers might have chosen—they could have listened to the Indians, recognized a relationship to the land other than that of self-righteous ownership—he's implying that contemporaries, too, might imagine and act on alternatives, rather than passively accepting lies and delusions. Finally, near the book's end, he evokes the vast beauty of the sky and universe, contrasts the possibility of love and joy to the hopelessness represented by the VAH, and pleads with his readers,

look at me and the hospital
where stricken men and broken boys
are mortared and sealed
into its defensive walls. O look,
now. (83)

If we will truly "look / now," he implies, we will become witnesses and contribute to change.

Having given his testimony, Ortiz can finally rely only on hope, but the terms in which he imagines hope, in the context of this history, must be limited unless his witness compels his listeners to faith and action. The vets' anger, repeatedly evoked, is potentially liberating, but unless guided by faith and love, Ortiz believes, it can only be destructive and paralyzing. Shortly after we see him defeated and frustrated in the Salvation Army store, we learn of another Indian vet's desire to break in, to

kill, yet another “blunt[s] his fingers / on the wall” (57). Yet Ortiz has affirmed that those who have been “broken and scattered” will remember and question, and “decide” guided by “truth and love” (56). A few pages later he states what I believe is the core of his faith: “This swirl of America has a special mystique that we have been sold, but look north, west, south, east, all around; *it is ours to know*” (60; emphasis added). Indians have been robbed, and like the settlers, the vets, and all of us, have “bought” lies, but knowledge itself implies the possibility of redemption, a word Ortiz uses in his next collection of poems, *After and Before the Lightning*, which painfully and hopefully continues to examine the possible grounds for shared survival.

Ortiz’s dream of a new America stands in persistent, hopeful opposition to the American dream of Manifest Destiny, the “dream [that] crossed / rivers and burned forests / and scarred futures” (75), and became the “bad dreams” of nights in the Veterans’ Hospital (45). This contest of dreams is encapsulated in one brief prose passage: “It’s almost inexplicable that Bleak Elk would say the dream ended; we know why now, and we know it did not and will not end” (40). This sentence both recognizes the power of colonization and resists it; it both evokes imprisonment in the dogma of Manifest Destiny (a virtually literal imprisonment, considering how *Black Elk Speaks* was created) and announces a prison break that is also an implicit rejection of the fiction of the noble, vanishing savage, and that frees Ortiz to envision his new America. The knowledge of colonization and indoctrination, and of continuance that makes this prison break possible will also, Ortiz implies, transform self-destroying anger to the “honest and healthy anger which will raze these walls, and . . . free our muscles, minds, spirits” (84).

But the prison that is not only the hospital, but racism, greed, propaganda, distorted history, and fear, is not so easily razed. Witnessing another vet’s “ferocious,” weeping anger is not liberating but paralyzing: “I could only cry, / mangled / like his anger” (85). Here Ortiz draws attention to the personal, visceral response, to remind us that the claim and the accomplishment of liberation are not identical. The ringing assertion is inevitably modified by intimate, individual knowledge. Another pair of passages repeats this pattern of claim and chastened response. First, “I have always loved America; it is something precious in the memory in blood and cells which insists on story, poetry, song, life, life!” (92). In this short sentence Ortiz offers an alternative to the dreams of Manifest Destiny, and he links witness (story, poetry, song) to life. On the facing page, we have our last view of a veteran: the Oklahoma Boy with his beautiful but damaged face “has become the American, / vengeful and a

wasteland / of fortunes, for now" (93). "For now": these final words of the book's penultimate poem may imply hope, but it is a hope qualified by what the poet has seen and dependent on the effect of his accumulated witnessing. This poem, which describes in detail the Oklahoma Boy's degradation, is followed by the book's final words, the promise of a new American dream "wealthy with love," that "will rise / in this heart which is our America" (np). Perhaps only one who has witnessed as Ortiz has, has earned the right and the power to make such a claim without its becoming just another slogan of today's preachers of religious or political expediency.

Ortiz's witnessing makes Sand Creek and what it represents central to American history. Settlers and other whites, named or not, are referred to primarily in terms of the displacement and murder of Indians. Thus witnessing offers a new center and marginalizes the conventional "heroes"—generals, politicians, pioneers. Such reorientations of the "official story" of American history may, in keeping with Ortiz's belief in the power of story and language, help build the foundation of the renewed America he prophesies here and elsewhere. In his essay "Towards a National Indian Literature," he defines such a re- (or de-) centering, as he finds in a new Indian nationalism the spirit of a new America:

It is also because of the acknowledgment by Indian writers of a responsibility to advocate for their peoples self-government, sovereignty, and control of land and natural resources; and to look also at racism, political and economic oppression, sexism, supremacism, and the needless and wasteful exploitation of land and people, especially in the US, that Indian literature is developing a character of nationalism which indeed it should have. It is this character which will prove to be the heart and fibre and story of an America which has heretofore too often feared its deepest and most honest emotions of love and compassion. It is this story, wealthy in being without an illusion of dominant power and capitalistic abundance, that is the most authentic. (12)

NOTES

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- ¹ Ortiz summarizes the history of the massacre on the (unnumbered) page before the first poem of *From Sand Creek*. See Hoig for a full

account.

² Introductory poem, unnumbered page.

³ The *OED*'s first cited use of "American" to designate "a native of America of European descent" comes from 1765. When Crèvecoeur asked "What is an American, this new man?" in 1782, his use of "American" definitely excluded "Indian." Boelhower is one of many scholars who have analyzed the development of "American" identity as excluding the indigenous peoples: "The paradigm logic of Euro-American identity also produced the original interpretation of him who, through the same interpretative process, remained the continents most blatant other self. . . . The game was (and is) one of presence and absence: but absence here means the Indians removal from the communitary structure of the self as American" (44-45). Brian Swann puts this more bluntly: "The conquest of the Indians made the country uniquely American" (quoted in Boelhower, 63).

⁴ Ortiz twice (55, 91) juxtaposes references to the 19th century with allusions to other imperialist American adventures.

⁵ See Hoig, 178-86.

⁶ See Kenny for a critique of Whitman's attitudes on Indians.

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Giving Voice: Autobiographical/Testimonial Literature by First Nations Women of British Columbia

Laura J. Beard

Since 1970, the Casa de las Americas has awarded a prize in the category of *testimonio*, serving as the mark of recognition of the testimonial work as a separate genre. The growing numbers of critical articles, including special journal issues dedicated to testimonial literature, attest to the popularity of the genre as do the number of university courses that include testimonial works. Recently, of course, the controversy caused by David Stoll's study of Rigoberta Menchú's book and her work in Guatemala has caused further discussion and debate about the legitimacy and authenticity of the testimonial genre.

Questions abound about the definition of the testimonial, a genre that inevitably raises issues about the construction of personal, cultural, ethnic, and national identity. The widespread nature of the debate is exemplified by the 1991 publication of a special issue of *Latin American Perspectives*¹ dedicated to testimonial literature in Latin America. In their introduction, "Voices for the Voiceless," co-editors Georg Gugelberger and Michael Kearney contrast testimonial literature—produced by subaltern people on the periphery of the colonial situation—to the conventional writing about the colonial situation produced at the centers of colonial power. In spite of this increasing critical attention, there is no agreed-

upon definition of the genre nor a set canon. However, George Yúdice, a contributor to the *Latin American Perspectives* volume, provides a useful definition to keep in mind while examining controversies in the field:

An authentic narrative, told by a witness who is moved to narrate by the urgency of a situation (e.g., war, oppression, revolution, etc.). Emphasizing popular oral discourse, the witness portrays his or her own experience as representative of a collective memory and identity. Truth is summoned in the cause of denouncing a present situation of exploitation and oppression or exorcising and setting aright official history. (in Gulgelberger and Kearney 4, their emphasis)

One topic of debate involves the generic distinctions between testimonial literature and the various genres with which testimonials share some characteristics, like autobiography, ethnographic life histories, slave narratives, and holocaust literature. Like testimonial works, slave narratives and holocaust literature have both documentary aspects and the intention of forcing the reader to reexamine the official histories of oppressed peoples. Slave narratives and holocaust literature often focus on the story of a single individual as representative of a collective memory and identity. Such narratives seek to exorcise and set aright official history, another part of Yúdice's definition. But slave narratives and holocaust literature differ significantly from testimonial literature in that the situation of exploitation and oppression they denounce is a past one. Testimonial literature addresses present situations and looks to future solutions, to revolutionary solutions, and to a transformed society as envisioned by the witness telling her story.

Testimonials also differ from the traditional autobiography in which the person writing his or her autobiography sees that particular life as exemplary, unique, individually significant. In contrast, Guatemalan activist Rigoberta Menchú reminds us, "I'd like to stress that its not only my life, its also the testimony of my people. . . . My story is the story of all poor Guatemalans. My personal experience is the reality of a whole people" (1). Domitila Barrios de Chungara of Bolivia similarly stresses that hers is not just a personal story. The self is defined not in individual terms but in collective terms, as part of a collective struggle and a communal identity. As Yúdice asserts, "the speaker does not speak for or represent a community but rather forms an act of identity-formation which is simultaneously personal and collective" (15). Doris Sommer, in "Not Just a Personal Story," affirms that the "singular represents the plural not because it replaces or subsumes the group but because the speaker is a

distinguishable part of the whole" (108).

Testimonial literature at times seems an inherently contradictory term, presenting a challenge to the very concept of the literary and confusing the issue of the authorial signature. Who has the right to speak or to write? What forms are considered appropriate for their utterances to take? (Godard 185). While authors of autobiographies are considered just that, authors, with all the authority granted thereby, no one is quite sure what to call those involved in the production of a *testimonio*. Rigoberta Menchú spoke her story out loud to someone else (Elizabeth Burgos-Debray)—someone of a different country, race, ethnicity, social and economic class, educational level—who wrote the text. Who is the author and where does the authority lie?²

In part, the authority of testimonial works lies in the lived experience of the people telling their stories. As readers, we grant Rigoberta or Domitila, neither a professional writer, authority because of the profound nature of their struggles, struggles to live, to feed themselves and their families, to exist as human beings of worth and value in societies which do not recognize their value, societies which sometimes do not recognize their very existence.

In *For Those Who Come After*, Arnold Krupat similarly argues that Native American autobiography is a contradiction of terms, as he considers autobiography a European invention of comparatively recent date and asserts that "[t]here simply were no Native American texts until whites decided to collaborate with Indians and make them" (5). He further argues that the concept is contradictory because the autobiographical project is usually marked by "egocentric individualism, historicism, and writing," none of which have "ever characterized the native cultures of the present-day United States" (29). Looking at the early Indian autobiographies in the United States—starting after the Indian Removal Act of 1830, increasing in number after the U. S. Civil War, and lasting until the 1930s—Krupat raises the same questions about the mode of production of the text as seen in discussions of the more recent testimonial works in Latin America:

How well did the various workers (Indian informant-speaker, white editor-transcriber, and also apparently in all cases at least one translator, usually part-Indian and part-white) know one another's language? Under what auspices was the text produced, and what claims were made for it? . . . What were the apparent intentions of the producers and what benefits did they derive from their collaborative project? (7-8)

As Krupat notes, it is only with the westward movement of the whites, with the Indian Removal Act and the Trail of Tears, that Indians are seen as historical subjects with stories to tell. Indian autobiographies were often envisioned by the whites involved in their production as textual spaces for the Indian to admit defeat. Yet, “the production of an Indian’s own statement of his inevitable disappearance required that the Indian be represented as speaking in his own *voice*. . . And it is in its presentation of an Indian *voice not as vanished and silent*, but as still living and able to be heard that the oppositional potential of Indian autobiography resides” (35, emphasis added). As in the Latin American testimonial works, the concept of giving voice to a repressed segment of society is stressed.

Anthologies and critical works on Native women in North America also echo this notion of giving voice to the voiceless. Paula Gunn Allen, in *The Sacred Hoop*, argues that only recently have American Indian women chosen to define themselves politically as Indian *women*, as their status has declined seriously over centuries of white dominance, “as they have been all but *voiceless* in tribal decision-making bodies since reconstitution of the tribes through colonial fiat and US law” (30, emphasis added). Julia Emberley, in *Thresholds of Difference*, affirms that “‘giving voice’ in print culture is one way Native writers empower themselves and claim themselves as agents of their own cultural traditions” (73). Co-editors Laura F. Klein and Lillian A. Ackerman begin their introduction to *Women and Power in Native North America*, by noting that “silence surrounds the lives of Native North American women” (3) and asserting that the chapters in their book “give voice to the silences” (4). Similarly, in *Writing the Circle: Native Women of Western Canada*, editors Jeanne Perreault and Sylvia Vance present their anthology as a collection of voices that had not been widely heard and that have been missing from all Canadians’ understanding of their society and literature (xi). Noting that the systemic racism and sexism in Canadian society make every stage of writing and publishing less accessible to Native women,³ the two non-Native women put together the anthology. The preface by Emma LaRoque reminds us that

to discuss Native literature is to tangle with a myriad of issues: voicelessness, accessibility, stereotypes, appropriation, ghettoization, linguistic, cultural, sexual, and colonial roots of experience, and, therefore, of self-expression—all issues that bang at the door of conventional notions about Canada and about literature. (xv)

While the idea of voicelessness (first on LaRoque’s list) echoes the title

of Gugelberger and Kearney's introduction, LaRoque takes issue with that term, questioning whether the Indian and the Métis were voiceless. LaRoque acknowledges that many Natives were illiterate in Canada into the 1970s, even into the 1990s, because the Canadian educational system failed to impart basic writing and reading skills to Native youth. And while being illiterate can make one voiceless in a country that revolves around the printed word, LaRoque concedes, it certainly did not mean that the Native peoples had no words, no literature, no wealth of knowledge.⁴ As LaRoque asserts, "the issue is not that Native peoples were ever wordless but that, in Canada, their words were literally and politically negated" (xi).

Part of the negation of Native words was accomplished in the well-known and centuries-long practice in Canada and the United States of placing Native children in residential schools and public schools where they were often forbidden to speak their own languages or to engage in their own cultural or religious practices. Allen discusses the work of the Jesuits, particularly Fr. Paul Le Jeune, with the Montagnais-Naskapi of the St. Lawrence Valley in the sixteenth century. Le Jeune felt the only solution for the "Savages" was in the abduction or seduction of children into attendance at Jesuit-run schools a long way from their homes.

"The Savages prevent their [children's] instruction; they will not tolerate the chastisement of their children, whatever they may do, they permit only a simple reprimand" (in Allen 39). In the nineteenth century, the eastern "liberals" known as the "Friends of the Indian" wanted "to provide a universal government school system that would make good Americans out of the rising generation of Indians" (Prucha 6). Allen, however, defines the educational methods to which Indian children were subjected in government and mission schools as torture, imprisonment, battering, neglect, and psychological torment (39). The Native children's family, communal, and ethnic identities were to be erased at whatever emotional and psychic cost.

Shirley Sterling's 1992 *My Name is Seepeetza* is an autobiographical first novel that tells the story of a young girl of the interior Salish Nation of British Columbia sent to an Indian residential school where her name is changed, and all aspects of her Native identity denied. Telling the story of one young girl, *My Name is Seepeetza* speaks to the racism and oppression encountered by Native children throughout Canada and the United States.

While I classify Sterling's work as an autobiographical novel, it is testimonial in many respects. Borrowing again from Yúdice's definition, we can see Sterling using "her own experience as representative of

a collective memory and identity,” as stressed in the dedication to her book:

To all those who went to the residential schools, and those who tried to help, may you weep and be made free. May you laugh and find your child again. May you recover the treasure that has been lost, the name that gives your life meaning, the mythology by which you can pick up and rebuild the shattered pieces of the past. . . . (7)

For Sterling, writing—and perhaps for Native readers, reading—the novel is to be cathartic, to recover and release strong emotions buried deep in the psyche. Sterling and others who suffered through abuses (physical, mental, and emotional) in the residential schools carry scars that might be recognized and soothed in part through the writing and reading of testimonial works. Sterling’s novel seeks to summon truth in the cause of denouncing the situation of exploitation and oppression in the Indian residential schools Canadian law required all Native children to attend.

Like some of the more well-known testimonial works by Latin American women mentioned above (most notably *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia* but also “*Si me ipermiten hablar . . .*” *Testimonio de Domitila, una muler de las minas de Bolivia*), Sterling’s title is an affirmation of identity and an assertion of her proper name. On the cover of the book, *My Name is SEEPEETZA*, all the letters of Seepeetza are capitalized, making the affirmation of that identity even more emphatic. The statement is a reclamation of her own name, the name she was given by her family, not the unbidden Martha Stone she was called in the residential school.⁵ Sterling’s novel is written in the form of a journal, with dated entries, in the voice of a young schoolgirl. It is not an autobiography in which an adult self discusses childhood events from the adult perspective, but rather an attempt to recapture the perspective and voice of the young girl Seepeetza/Martha Stone, the focalizer throughout the text.

Prior to the first diary entry are two hand-drawn and hand-lettered maps: one of the family ranch and one of the school property. The first is labeled “Joyaska Ranch by Seepeetza”; the second, “School Map by Martha Stone” (8-9). The labels stress the split identity she experienced: Martha Stone at school, Seepeetza at home on the ranch. The items drawn in on the maps are important to the young girl: on the map of the ranch we see not only “our house,” the wood shed, outhouse, barn, corrals, well, granary, and blacksmith, but also “Dad’s truck,” “trees where the cows have their calves,” “Jimmy’s secret strawberry patch,” “Missy’s

picnic spot,” the “dead calf tree,” and “animal graves.” There is an intimacy to the drawing, a sense that sites of nature are personalized, made special (perhaps almost sacred⁶), by their connections with the occupants of the ranch, both human and animal. The lines of the ranch drawing curve: the creek meanders, the trail to the river is not straight, the old fence zig zags, the trees are in bunches.

The school map, by contrast, seems ordered, organized, full of straight lines. The map is mostly of buildings and roads; the only representatives of the natural world are the trees unnaturally placed in strict rows in the orchard or the one straight line of maple trees in front of the main school building. Divisions are carefully marked: old classrooms, new classrooms; boys’ side, girls’ side. While the ranch drawing gives the impression that all of the ranch was open to and celebrated by the children, on the school drawing it is clear that different areas were designated for separate, approved activities.⁷

The first diary entry, dated “Thursday, September 11, 1958, Kalamak Indian Residential School,” supports the impression created by the map. After introducing herself, she describes the division of the school into grades, dormitories and recreation rooms, adding, “We’re not allowed to leave our own rec or dorm except for meals” (12). That she explains that dormitories are called dorms and recreation rooms are called recs emphasizes the foreignness of the residential school culture to the young Salish Nation girl. The activities and behaviors of the students are closely monitored, with no allowance for family affection or interaction. Seepeetza’s description of supervised meals in the dining hall, with a wall separating the boys’ side from the girls’ side, is particularly poignant: “One of the Sisters watches us eat, but not when we walk back to our recs. That’s when my sisters Dorothy and Missy and I sometimes hold hands as we walk down the hall. It’s the happiest part of my day” (12). The age difference between the sisters keeps them apart and they must sneak unsupervised moments of affection and connection in an alienating world. In the first diary entry Seepeetza also contrasts life at home where “we can ride horses, go swimming at the river, run in the hills, climb trees and laugh out loud and holler yahoo anytime we like and we won’t get in trouble” (13-14) with life at the residential school where “we get punished for talking, looking at boys in church, even stepping out of line” and ends the first diary entry with the bald statement “I wish I could live at home instead of here” (14).

The diary we read is a secret journal, written during Thursday library time and on weekends when Sister Theo is busy, penned clandestinely in a writing tablet labeled arithmetic. Expressing her true feelings

has to be a secret activity, an act of transgression, as she lives under a system of censorship. As she explains,

I'll get in trouble if I get caught. Sister Theo checks our letters home. We're not allowed to say anything about the school. I might get the strap, or worse. Last year some boys ran away from school because one of the priests was doing something bad to them. The boys were caught and whipped. They had their heads shaved and they had to wear dresses and kneel in the dining room and watch everybody eat. They only had bread and water for a week. Everybody was supposed to laugh at them and make fun of them but nobody did. (12-13)

The passage describes the physical and emotional abuse heaped onto boys who had run away to escape the implied sexual abuse by one of the priests at the school. These forms of abuse were common in the residential schools. In the third journal entry, Seepeetza describes when her parents took her to the residential school for the first time. "We drove for a long time" stresses the distance, literally the geographical distance but also the cultural distance, between their ranch and the residential school. When her mother leaves her in the school with the nuns, "I looked at her walking away from me. I heard her footsteps echoing, and I was so scared I felt like I had a giant bee sting over my whole body. Then I stopped feeling anything" (17). The short, stark "Then I stopped feeling anything" carries a powerful, if understated, emotional punch.

As it is assumed that all Indian children are dirty, all the new girls are lined up to have coal oil put in their hair to kill nits and lice, given baths and haircuts ("Sister Theo says long straight hair makes us look like wild Indians" [32]) and dressed in matching smocks, bloomers, and undershirts. Their own clothes are taken away from them and locked in a storage room. Often in the residential schools, all items the Native children brought with them were taken.

In the residential school, Seepeetza suffers at the hands not only of the nuns, but also of the bigger girls. While the teachers look down on her as Indian, the other Native children torment her because she has green eyes, calling her a "dirty shamah" (20). With an Irish paternal grandfather, she has mixed features, a circumstance which prevents her from having many friends in the residential school (29). The bullying among the schoolchildren might be interpreted as the rage against whites being expressed through violence directed at each other, violence that Seepeetza finds physically and emotionally painful. Seepeetza writes that she wishes

she could hide under the water of the Tomas River and never come out, or travel a million miles into outer space and never come back (20).

Seepeetza frequently is punished by the nuns for daydreaming, but explains that “I can’t help it. I can’t stop thinking of home. I keep remembering what it’s like to go riding horses all summer and help my dad put up the hay” (35). The journal entries are full of contrasts between life at the residential school and life at home. At home, all the family talks (“in Indian” as she says), laughs, and sings while they work; at the school the girls are not allowed to talk. At home, they have green wool blankets and their mother’s brightly colored patchwork quilts to keep them warm. At school the blankets are grey and Seepeetza is cold on winter nights.

Each fall when Seepeetza returns to the residential school, she feels something inside her die: “it’s like I get a numb feeling over my whole body and I’m hiding way down inside myself. I don’t really hear or see what’s going on around me. Just sort of. It’s like a buzzing that’s far away” (36). To survive the cultural alienation of the residential school, she must hide away part of her self.

Seepeetza admires and emulates her father who is not just a rancher, but also a court interpreter. “He speaks lots of Indian languages, but he won’t teach us. Mum won’t either. She says the nuns and priests will strap us. I wonder why it’s bad” (36). In spite of Seepeetza’s immersion in the residential school, she does not always understand the values and judgments of the white society.

Seepeetza’s experience at the residential school highlights the valorization of certain ethnic identities and the rejection of others. While the ethnicities of the First Nations are not valued, Seepeetza and other classmates are taught to perform Irish dances, in traditional Irish costumes, for the entertainment of (presumably white) Canadian audiences. Seepeetza comments in her diary that Father Sloane took pictures of them dancing in their costumes at the Irish concert: “It was funny because I was smiling in those pictures. I looked happy. How can I look happy when I am scared all the time?” (36-37).

Throughout the diary entries, readers view Canadian society and, in particular, the residential school system through the eyes of Seepeetza. Her gaze defamiliarizes and denaturalizes the world of adults, especially of white adults. The novel explores the complex processes through which the Salish child is turned into a subject of the Canadian state. A careful reading of the autobiographical novel thus serves to reveal how becoming an adult Canadian citizen requires the interiorization and naturalization of a racist ideology.

Seepeetza’s last journal entry, August 27, 1959, is written when she

is preparing to return to the residential school after a summer at home. She has decided to leave her secret journal at home and will ask her grandmother to make a beaded buckskin cover for it. Among the First Nations of British Columbia, the making and use of beaded articles serves as an important marker of cultural identity and a commitment to cultural continuity. The giving of beaded gifts reaffirms kinship ties, and often grandmothers bead bags and ceremonial garments for grandchildren (Duncan 106, 109). Readers of *My Name is Seepeetza* are left with this vision of the journal written in English by the child sent to boarding school, lovingly encased in a traditional art form practiced by her grandmother. The hybridity highlighted in this final image is characteristic of what critics have written about the genre of Indian women's autobiography as already hybrid, drawing on both the written tradition of Euroamerican autobiography and on the traditions of Native orature (Lundgren 71). Gretchen Bataille and Kathleen Sands point out that Indian women's autobiographies commonly convey "the connectedness of all things, of personal life flow, and episodes often are not sequential but linked thematically to establish a pattern of character developing through the response to private experience" (8). The thematic rather than sequential links are common to Seepeetza's narrative, a characteristic apparently at odds with the journal format.

By choosing a format that would seem to require a linear chronology, and then subverting that linear chronology, Sterling presents her readers with a text that can be interpreted as an act of decolonization, for, as Barbara Goodard argues,

Narrative is a way of exploring history and questioning the historical narratives of the colonizer which have violently interposed themselves in place of the history of the colonized. Experimentation, especially with structures of chronology, is part of this challenge, a radical questioning of historiographical versions of the past as developed in the "master narratives," in order to rewrite the historical ending. (198)

The breaks from linear chronology, the development by association rather than by chronological sequence, and the often colloquial tone are all elements that link Sterling's autobiographical text to Native oral traditions.

Lee Maracle's *Bobbi Lee: Indian Rebel* was originally published in 1975, the year of the first general assembly of the World Council of Indigenous Peoples (WCIP), held in Port Alberni, Vancouver. At the general assembly, WCIP developed a definition of the "Fourth World," as

formed by indigenous minority peoples. Chadwick Allen argues that the WCIP's development of a narrative definition of indigenous peoples, rather than a set of criteria, is part of "a project of post-colonial literature and autoethnography that both engages and attempts to counter the First World's dominant discourses of master narrative and ethnic taxonomy" (237). Allen notes that his use of the term autoethnographic follows Mary Louise Pratt's in *Imperial Eyes*: "instances in which colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that engage with the colonizer's own terms" (7).

Maracle's *Bobbi Lee* is a work that attempts to counter the First World's dominant discourses of master narrative and ethnic taxonomy. *Bobbi Lee* is referred to on the back cover of the 1990 edition as an autobiography, yet Maracle discusses in an interview with Jennifer Kelly the difficulties she encountered in getting the book published, being told by many that "*Bobbi Lee* was too political to be autobiography" (82). Maracle likewise recounts that her 1990 collection *Sojourner's Truth and Other Stories* "was not published at first because the stories were too controversial" (82). Her works, by not always fitting neatly into traditional genres and social conventions, have not been easy to publish in *The Sacred Hoop*, Paula Gunon Allen argues that the world view often held by Native writers does not allow for the strict separation of literary genres "It is reasonable, from an Indian point of view, that all literary forms should be interrelated, given the basic idea of the unity and relatedness of all the phenomena of life" (62). Not only does the departure from traditional canonical forms make publication difficult, but so too does the fact that, as Agnes Grant notes, the written tradition of Canada "often overlooks Natives because Natives are not generally considered a living, contributing factor in all facets of Canadian society" (125).

In interviews, Maracle weighs in on issues being debated in literary fields. She argues that white writers are much less capable of writing Native characters than Native writers are at portraying white characters, claiming that it "has to do with hierarchy and the way it works. The people at the bottom see more clearly what's happening than the people at the top seeing down" (Kelly 83). Maracle notes that whites are largely unaware of the racism and oppression intrinsic in Canadian society because whites can afford to be unaware and apathetic while Natives cannot (Kelly 81). Their very lives and identities are at stake.

The racist ideology Maracle critiques in all her writings is not just an idea or a value system. Ideology is a material practice and Natives, most particularly Native women, live under the brunt of that brutal material practice. Maracle not infrequently makes the connection between racism

and sexism: "It's like the woman question. Men aren't very good in the realm of anti-sexism. Their intentions might be there, but they haven't done much anti-sexist work" (Kelly 83). Maracle continually stresses how racism operates as sexism within the Native communities, and how sexism operates as internalized racism.

Bobbi Lee, like some of the Latin American *testimonios* discussed above, was created out of the collaboration of a Native woman and a white academic/activist. Lee Maracle told her life story to Donald Barnett, chairman of the Liberation Support Movement. In the prologue, Maracle explains:

There are two voices in the pages of this book, mine and Donald Barnett's. . . . We had disagreements over what to include and what to exclude, disagreements over wording, voice. In the end, the voice that reached the paper was Don's, the information alone was mine. (19)

Maracle's prologue makes explicit what is often not expressed in the collaborative testimonial work between two people of different races, classes, ethnicities. Like Rigoberta Menchú, who claims that there are many things indigenous people in Guatemala will not share with whites, Maracle explains that she "didn't, couldn't tell him everything" (19). There were truths too painful to share with a white man. That Maracle claims the voice that reached the paper was Barnett's also questions to what extent testimonial literature does "give voice to the voiceless" and confirms Krupat's assertion that "the structure of Indian autobiography is ultimately the responsibility of the Euroamerican editor" (111).

In her forward to *Bobbi Lee*, Armstrong asserts both that "the telling of the Native sojourn through the quagmire of Canada's colonialist past is an extremely important human document to Canadian literature" and that in "the movement of the life of Bobbi Lee, what unfolds is the story of many natives" (15). Like the Latin American testimonial works, Bobbi Lee's story is presented as not just a personal story. Her story presents the harsh realities of her life, allowing readers to see those realities, as Armstrong notes, "through the mix of native and non-native values and customs jammed together for survival purposes" (15).

The first chapter of Maracle's text, entitled "Turbulent Childhood" (21), tells the story of a girl born in Vancouver in 1950 and raised in poverty on the mud flats of the North Shore. The family house had originally been a boatshed and was without heating, hot water, or electricity. Her parents fought frequently, with the father away for extended periods

of time. When he was home, he often was both violent and drunk, calling Bobbi's mother a "dirty old squaw" (34). The tale of Bobbi's youth is one of systemic violence and racism. Her father routinely beats her brother Ed and throws him against the wall (24), her mother threatens various men with an axe (25), Bobbi and her brother Roger drag their three-year-old sister Joan through brambles (27-28). Bobbi's family is ostracized by many of the other families on the mudflats, due in part to their race and in part, seemingly, to her mother's reputation (the children in the family have different biological fathers). The white boys in the neighborhood pick on the Native children, but the Native children also retaliate with racist violence. Ten of the Native children "were making faces at Jimmy (Waddel) from around the corner of a house, calling him 'dirty old man,' 'whitey,' 'white boy' and things like that" (27). They chain him to a tree and leave him crying there all night.

Violence is part and parcel of almost every story. When her overworked mother is seriously ill, Bobbi Lee calmly announces:

I thought it was my dad's fault that she was dying because he wouldn't take her to the hospital. I decided I would shoot him. . . . I knew about death because we had done a lot of duck hunting and fishing. I thought it wouldn't be difficult to shoot dad. . . . You have to understand that I really loved mom, and I hated my dad—especially when I was a young kid. (28-29)

Her seemingly unemotional determination to kill her father underscores her own alienation. At school, she frequently threatens to kill other kids who have angered her (36-37). Completely ostracized, she feels contempt for all whites. Refusing to accept their racist attitudes, she finds that the cockier she is, the more their racism comes out. "And because I wouldn't kowtow, bow or scrape or be their scapegoat, I got into a lot of fights and was beaten up more than any kid I knew" (50). Bobbi Lee's critical consciousness is formed as she acquires the critical skill of interpretation, as she learns to read the painful experience of negation in school as the ideology of racism.

Paula Gunn Allen argues that Native women are caught in a bicultural bind that has them vacillating between being dependent or being strong, self-reliant and powerless, and that they resolve the dilemma in different ways:

some of us party all the time; some of us drink to excess; some of us travel and move around a lot; some of us land good jobs and then

quit them; some of us engage in violent exchanges; some of us blow our brains out. We act in these destructive ways because we suffer from the societal conflicts caused by having to identify with two hopelessly opposed cultural definitions of women. . . . Our situation is caused by the exigencies of a history of invasion, conquest, and colonization whose searing marks are probably ineradicable. (48-49)

Most of the forms of destructive behavior outlined by Allen are evinced by Bobbi Lee during the period of her life narrated in the text.

At age fifteen, Bobbi starts getting drunk (44). She alternately argues with and ignores her mother, rarely attends school, stays out until four AM, is eventually admitted to a hospital for psychiatric care after an episode at school when she throws a desk at her teacher. The doctors tell her she had a nervous breakdown, keep her medicated for three weeks, and prescribe tranquilizers and psychiatry after her release. The entire episode is recounted in the apathetic tone of an impersonal observer, underscoring her complete sense of alienation from her family, her doctors, her self, and her own body. "I rarely took the tranquilizers and never went to see the psychiatrist. At home I just tried to forget the whole thing" (48).

Shortly before her sixteenth birthday, when Bobbi Lee's mother kicks her out of the house, she goes to Visalia, California, to join her older foster sister. Living with Mexican farmworkers, picking grapes and other farm products, she starts to notice and ponder on the racism in a town made up of mostly Mexicans, some Anglo Americans, a few African Americans, and a few Native Americans. "This was my first experience with really blatant racism. Not that I'd never experienced any racism before—far from it. But here it was so common, so much a part of everyday life, that people never even thought about it" (53). Although she only stays in California four months, she is very struck by the cultural differences. The experience of racism there strengthens her process of consciousness-raising on issues of both racism and sexism. Returning to Vancouver, she discovers her brothers have left home, and one of her fourteen-year-old sisters had been raped while the other had been forced to watch.

The middle part of the book, with chapters entitled "Hippie Life-Style 1967," "Toronto: Anti-War Demonstrations and Racism," and "A Real Bad Trip," tell of her experiences in Toronto, living as a hippie, doing drugs, involved rather marginally in anti-war demonstrations. She works occasionally, sells drugs on the street, drinks a lot, witnesses further violence, but recounts that violence, even the death of people she

knew, in completely impersonal tones. Her drug use increases as she becomes more addicted to heroin, coming close to an overdose more than once. Looking back, she realizes:

I think that unconsciously I wanted to overdose; I really hated my existence. I had taken this path deliberately, not out of ignorance or naivete, and was just giving up on life. I knew the stuff would eventually kill me, yet I kept on taking it. And in the meantime I started feeling completely dehumanized, like a vegetable. I actually stopped acting like a human being—didn't laugh, didn't cry, didn't find things funny or sad. (105)

At age 17, Bobbi Lee is so alienated from her self, from any sense of identity, that she no longer feels human nor recognizes any value in her own life. Her heavy drug use keeps her from thinking about the social, political, and economic concerns that impact her own place in society.

It is only when she leaves Toronto, and gets off drugs and alcohol, that Bobbi Lee becomes involved with the Native Alliance for Red Power (NARP), participates in a fish-in, organizes demonstrations, and works as part of a street patrol on skid row in Vancouver to help protect First Nations people against police harassment. Her experiences on the trip back to British Columbia and in Vancouver can in some ways be seen as a journey of maturation, one that allows her to begin to explore personal and communal identity formation.

Bobbi Lee: Indian Rebel ends abruptly, with no closure to the original manuscript. Bobbi Lee's life story is presented not as one that has achieved full significance but rather one that is still seeking significance and meaning. A Western desire for an ending, or at least the sense of an ending, is frustrated.

In the 1990 edition of the text, Bobbi Lee's story is framed by prefatory material and an epilogue. It begins with a piece entitled "Oka Peace Camp—September 9, 1990," in which Maracle writes of the tense situation in Quebec, preparing herself for death,

preparing to leave my children motherless because it feels like maybe bloodletting is what this country needs. Maybe if we just let the road to Oka run red with the blood of women, someone in this country will see the death and destruction this country has wrought on us. (6)

She writes of Canada as a battered country, with the land scarred in the

interests of corporate imperialism and with the language battered in the interest of sanctioning that scarring of the land. She speaks out against the building of golf courses on the sites of Native burial grounds and for the need to build a sustainable movement towards peace and justice.

At the end of the testimonial work is an "Epilogue," written years after the original text, in which Maracle mulls over "my misspent youth, the craziness of internalized racism, my own confusion and the holes rent in my memory" (199). She acknowledges whole parts of her life which were not written into the text. She acknowledges the rage inside her that led her to beat her own small daughters. As she explains, the violence she inflicted on her children

had nothing to do with drunkenness. I was sober and abusive. I had everything to do with racism and self-hate. I thought I hated white people and in fact, I did not love my own. I see this scene over and over again. Me, armed with a wooden spoon and her begging me to love her. (229-30)

Bobbi Lee repeated with her own children the abusive situation in which she was raised. Her *testimonio* emphasizes how women's bodies are often the central site on which and through which social violence is produced and reproduced.

Maracle reveals that as her marriage "sunk into a crazy kind of oblivion," she started writing to save her sanity:

Poetry and the comfort of my diaries—my books of madness I called them—where truth rolled out of my inner self, began to re-shape me. . . . In my diary, I faced my womanhood, my indigenous womanhood. I faced my inner hate, my anger and desertion of myself from our way of being. . . . It took twenty-five years to twist me and only ten to unravel the twist. (230)

With the appended epilogue, Bobbi Lee's story becomes, as Joy Harjo calls it on the back cover of the 1990 edition, "the charged story of a Native woman who has done more than survive, who despite great odds has burst forth singing a warrior song. . . . You will be changed." The more conventional sense of narrative closure comes, then, in the epilogue.

Maracle addresses the white population of Canada, arguing that if "they don't struggle with racism they will never be able to chart their own path to freedom" (241). Maracle has noted in an interview that

“‘Canada’ means village or community, and I’ve taken the spirit of that, the spirit of community, the spirit of Canada to heart” (Kelly 75), but she clearly believes that all Canadians have to work towards that goal. In the ending lines of the “Epilogue” to *Bobbi Lee*, she addresses readers directly: “In my life, look for your complicit silence, look for the inequality between yourself and others. . . . Don’t wait for me to jump up, put my back to the plough, wherever racism shows itself. You need to get out there and object, all by yourself. We have worked hard enough for you” (241).

We see here the witness moved to narrate by the urgency of a situation of oppression, determined both to denounce and to set aright official history. Maracle’s ending fits in with the activist intention of much testimonial literature. Like Domitila Barrios de Chungara, she demands readers’ participation in the struggle for a new, more just society. And like N. Scott Momaday, who argues that “the contemporary white American is willing to assume responsibility for the Indian—he is willing to take on the burdens of oppressed peoples everywhere—but he is decidedly unwilling to divest himself of the false assumptions which impede his good intentions” (72), Maracle critiques the supposed good intentions of white society.

In her work on literature by First Nations women of Canada, Agnes Grant argues that the question we must ask of these texts is whether the language “works to good effect, whether it communicates, whether it moves readers, whether it makes them see Canadian society through another person’s eyes” (125). Both Maracle’s testimonial work *Bobbi Lee: Indian Rebel* and Sterling’s autobiographical novel *My Name is Seepeetza*, like the testimonial works by women in Latin America, meet that challenge and more as they struggle to overcome the violence of epistemological enforcement that has ignored, yet often appropriated, the cultural contributions of First Nations people.

NOTES

- ¹ Defined on the inside front cover as “a theoretical and scholarly journal for discussion and debate on the political economy of capitalism, imperialism, and socialism in the Americas.”
- ² Current controversy over *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú* would also seem to ask, who is responsible for the ultimate truth value or for any

inaccuracies?

- 3 For more on this topic, see Goodard.
- 4 Brian Swann's introduction to his work on translation of Native American literatures opens with two blunt sentences: "The fact that Indians were human took some time to sink in. The fact that their languages had value took longer" (xiii).
- 5 Gerald Vizenor notes that the word "Indian" is an invented name that does not come from any native language or reveal the experiences of the diverse native peoples grouped under that imposed noun. "The name is unbidden, and the native heirs must bear an unnatural burden to be so christened in their own land" (xiii). Just so is the unbidden name Martha Stone an unnatural burden for Seepeetza.
- 6 Paula Gunn Allen makes the connection between the term *sacred* and the term *sacrifice*, defining the latter term as "'to make sacred.' What is made sacred is empowered" (28). The sites on the ranch are empowering sites for Seepeetza.
- 7 In her article on N. Scott Momaday's *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, Arlene A. Elder argues that the paintings in that text serve "to demonstrate this written works interpretation of the 'unity of the arts, a performance value intrinsic to orature" (273). She quotes Momaday's comments that drawing is a type of storytelling: "writing is drawing, and so the image and the word cannot be divided" (Coltelli 96; qtd. in Elder 273). While Momaday's novel is more closely linked to oral traditions than is Sterling's, and the paintings done by Momaday's father to illustrate the Kiowa myths and legends are more closely linked to native artistic traditions than are the maps in Sterling's text, Elder's reflection on the performance value intrinsic to orature is significant for Sterling's text.

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A Song to Tell Robert Bly How We Do This in My Language

My 'skin kin the ants
begin again the dance
A-ga-sga—it is raining.

Antelope pokes a hole a world below,
the new sky cries,
People emerge—it is raining.

The soldiers crowd the shivering hungry;
in a pen intended for cows a child dies,
from the eyes of the Aniyuniwiya—it is raining.

A man lifts his hands to the East,
the Grandmothers consult regarding blessings,
the dust returns from wind to earth—it is raining.

A white-washed church strains to reach the sun in Chiapas,
blood and brain stain its walls fresh from death,
the soil keeps drinking a five-hundred year old shot—it is raining.

The voices of my ancestors thin through brine
as they sing and flash in vast Atlantic,
a storm roars at sea and I am born, not from shell, but their bones and
dreams—it is raining.

Kimberly Musia Roppolo

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This year, the ASAIL will once again sponsor several special sessions at ALA's annual conference. We invite papers or 500-word proposals on any of the following topics:

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- Teaching about cultural tensions, apprehensions, or misapprehensions: negotiating tensions between aesthetics and politics in the classroom and beyond
- Texts and contexts: what counts in the creation and/or teaching of American Indian literatures?
- Connecting contemporary and traditional literatures for writers and for readers
- Narrative, poetic, and/or rhetorical strategies of American Indian writers
- Film or multi-media representations of/by American Indians
- American Indian authors work(s). Especially welcome will be papers which go beyond "canonical" American Indian writers or texts to examine those which have been overlooked or understudied in academic circles.

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Reviews

The Rez Road Follies: Canoes, Casinos, Computers, and Birch Bark Baskets by Jim Northrup. New York: Kodansha International, 1997. ISBN 0-8166-3495-5. 256 pages.

With the publication of *Walking the Rez Road* in 1993, Jim Northrup, Anishinaabeg poet, Vietnam veteran, grandfather, and activist, introduced readers to his compelling narrative blend of cutting humor and incisive cultural commentary. His book, *The Rez Road Follies*, brings to a wider audience his consummate skills as a storyteller, displayed both in his one-man shows such as “Rez Road 2000” and his column, “The Fond du Lac Follies,” syndicated throughout Indian Country. In this always engaging book, Northrup ladles out family and community stories, mixed liberally with pointed observations on a range of issues affecting Indian-white relations, from treaty rights to sports mascots. *Rez Road Follies* cycles through and around Northrup’s personal experiences—boarding school, the Vietnam War, travel adventures, family times—that in turn illuminate the complexities of contemporary Anishinaabeg who live “on an island. . . in the surrounding sea of what is now called America” (1).

In the first of the eight bilingually titled chapters comprising the book, “Families/Nindanawemaaganag,” Northrup locates the ground from which he speaks: Sawyer, on the Fond du Lac reservation in northern Minnesota. Declaring that “the family stories we tell help hold us together” (14), Northrup shares stories both comic and caustic, raw and affirmative, stories ranging from his survival of boarding school, and his relationship as “an almost elder” to grandson Ezigaa, to stories about the many dogs his family has known, to those relating his sons attempted suicide, as well as tragic losses linking community members, such as a

fatal fire at a neighbor's house, and the coerced sterilization of Indian women. Such stories stretch the seams of family, while showing the enduring strength of those seams. In a similar way, Northrup refuses the fragmenting narratives of family and identity imposed by outsiders: "I am my father's son and my children's father and only the government counts my blood in fractions" (14).

Threading the book's woven design of storytelling is Northrup's "questioning habit": "One way to find out something is to ask questions. Questions, like families, help make sense of the twists and turns of life. They highlight the humor were blessed with. They are linguistic tricksters; sometimes the shape of the question shifts before you get the answer, then you see the subject in a new way" (2). If "questions and answers are scattered across days, events, places, and stories" (14), then scattered throughout these deftly written essays are many questions and some answers about the joys and challenges of daily living, entrenched racism and stereotypes, and broader indigenous struggles for sovereignty and repatriation. In chapter two, for example, Northrup shows us that stories have seasons by writing about ricing, its meaning for him and his family, and its role in community gatherings. Noting that "seasons are questions and answers, patterns and surprises" (37), Northrup also traces the patterns of sugarbush season and seasons for rabbit snaring, stories of which are offered in alternating sections of Ojibwe and English, with a selected glossary of Ojibwe words. Northrup's inclusion of Ojibwe enables him "to preserve the language by using it. . .[and] to show how expressive, how complex the language can be" (51). In doing so, he also honors the language that was taken from him at boarding school, when "we had Ojibwe pounded out of us and English pounded in" (66). By chapter's end, Northrup's seasonal stories widen to encompass solidarity with "our cousins in Canada to our distant relatives in Mexico" (96), suggesting the "continuity of presence" (96) for indigenous peoples. Whether at home, in the "surrounding sea of America," or elsewhere, Northrup affirms that "by gathering the stories throughout the year, I can mark the places we have been and expand the limits of where we can go" (97).

Subsequent chapters entitled "Racism," "Politics," and "Gambling and Other Follies" mark the places Northrup has been over the past few decades in his efforts to dismantle stereotypes, challenge corruption within reservation governance, and assert Anishinaabeg treaty fishing rights amid violent backlashes in the region. Whether tackling the follies of self-interest, bigotry, and ignorance animating so much of US culture's treat-

ment of Native Americans, or the follies of mismanagement and fraud in tribal politics, Northrup wields a biting comic vision infused with deep concern for educating his audience. Part of this vision relies on the frequent use of his signature "Question and Answer" column that is also a feature of his newspaper pieces and performances. Throughout *Rez Road Follies*, Northrup uses "Q and A" to snare outsiders assumptions, stereotypes, and perceptions of Indian cultures: "Q. Are you a full-blooded Indian? A. No, Im a pint low, just came from the blood bank" (2). Others mine the vein of reservation or insider humor: "Q. What four words do bingo players hate? A. Someone else already won" (215). Laughter, crucial to Northrups formulation of psychological and cultural survival, also accompanies his encounters with enduring exhibitions of racism. One such story relates finding Native remains crudely glued to a board in an exhibit entitled "Stones and Bones" in a Minnesota county museum. Or, on that iconic image of the Vanishing Indian, the "End of the Trail," Northrup acidly comments: "Just once, I would like to see what that Indian looked like at the beginning of the trail" (116).

When not battling "treaty rights wars" (147), Northrup recounts his battles in surviving Vietnam, a formative life experience that has shaped much of the content of his writing. In a deeply moving account of his combat experiences in Vietnam and his subsequent efforts to "survive the peace," he illustrates his belief that we all need to "honor the warriors, but not the war makers" (193). Even as he chooses to march with other Indians rather than with his marine division in a Vietnam Veterans parade, Northrup finds that the trauma, grim humor, and pride of being a veteran stretch across national and ethnic boundaries, as when he describes his companys reunion in D.C. or his meeting with Russian veterans on a reservation.

In his final chapter, "Were Still Here," Northrup circles back to his home ground, reminding us that the stories within *The Rez Road Follies* cannot be contained by its pages as they forward the serious work of what Gerald Vizenor calls survivance. Turning to one of his most valued listeners, his grandson, Northrup writes: "I think I will have plenty of stories to tell him about where I have been. I will have time to tell him stories as we live our lives with the seasons, making syrup, making rice, making baskets and memories. . . . The questions and answers, like the Anishinaabeg, go on and on and on. Mii saw iw" (249).

Susan Bernardin

Dreams of Fiery Stars: The Transformations of Native American Fiction by Catherine Rainwater. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1999. ISBN 0-8122-1682-2. xvii + 222 pages.

Catherine Rainwater offers a fresh vision of the work of ten prominent contemporary American Indian writers by focusing her study through the lens of semiotics (especially as articulated by Thomas Sebeok) and by paying attention to the ways these writers actively instruct their audiences in cross-cultural interpretation. Rainwater is particularly interested in clarifying processes of reader reception: how dominant audiences connect American Indian texts to their own systems of meaning-making and understanding. Like other recent critics of contemporary American Indian fiction, she argues that the work of writers such as Silko, Momaday, Welch, Erdrich, Vizenor, Hogan, Allen, King, and Walters has been pre-occupied with "an urgent agenda of regeneration through the power of sign action" (xiii). Much of her book is devoted to elucidating the strategies through which such regeneration is either evoked, performed, or anticipated in narrative. Rainwater departs from other critics, however, in her "impression" that, in recent years, dominant audiences have expanded their "informational background" in ways that "allow for easier access to sophisticated American Indian thought" (xi). In other words, gone are the days of the dominant reader who dismisses distinctly American Indian ideas as either quaint, primitive, or extraordinary; in Rainwater's formulation, today's mainstream reader is not only open to but prepared to receive and prepared to participate in "the counter-colonial, world-transformative efforts" of American Indian writers (ix). Obviously, Rainwater's is an optimistic vision of contemporary reading practices and their potential effects.

In each of her five main chapters, Rainwater isolates particular strategies she sees at work in contemporary American Indian fiction and applies a semiotic analysis. Her topics include how narratives manage power relations through reader instruction and reformation; how narratives foster audience solidarity; how American Indian novels present alternative productions of individual and community identities; how these narratives handle the representation of time and space; and how they employ forms of intertextuality. Rainwater's summaries of Sebeok's and others' theories are clear and accessible. Her arguments about the operations of specific narrative strategies are largely persuasive and often compelling, and there is much to admire in the close readings of individual texts of-

ferred as support.

Throughout her analyses of specific narrative strategies, Rainwater asserts that American Indian texts possess the ability “to change a readers habits of interpretation” (30) or to produce a “political and aesthetic” impact on “the average reader” (89). Rainwater describes such readers as “careful,” “alert,” “adept,” and “industrious,” and she argues that, as a group, they are affected by the contemporary American Indian narratives they read in a number of significant ways. Most notably, Rainwater claims that works by American Indian authors “expand the intertext [the reader’s informational background] and re-form [the reader’s] memory which, in turn, informs [the reader’s] habitual reading practices” (152). The first part of Rainwater’s claim makes obvious sense: as they read more individual American Indian texts, careful readers become more adept and more sophisticated at decoding these texts’ particular narrative strategies. The same can be argued for what happens when careful readers confront any group of unfamiliar texts. But the second part of Rainwater’s claim is more difficult if not impossible to substantiate. How can we know whether or not these readers also become increasingly open to accepting the counter-hegemonic messages of American Indian texts? And how can we know whether or not these readers change their world views in ways that affect their thinking and behavior outside the immediate reading experience?

In what strikes this reader as an odd move, Rainwater pushes this part of her argument further by speculating that “contemporary Native American writers are *especially capable* of galvanizing reader-response with world-altering power mainly because the actual audience for their work is so diverse, so replete with readers with different reading practices” (153, emphasis added). Rainwater offers no support for either part of this claim.

As someone who teaches American Indian literature at a large state university to mostly non-Indian students, I share Rainwater’s enthusiasm for the power of American Indian fiction to challenge and to educate its readers, and I admire her optimism about the real world effects of reader response. But it is one thing to document the increasing number of books published by American Indian authors over the past three decades and to analyze the innovative narrative strategies these texts deploy, and it is quite another thing to document how these texts have had specific “world-altering” effects on “average” readers.

In her epilogue, Rainwater speculates that this mainstream audience has been enabled to expand its frame of reference to include American

Indian ideas about regeneration not only because it has been reading American Indian fiction but also because it has expanded its “store of common knowledge.” Rainwater states, “I believe that it is the analogous worldviews in the contemporary western readers frame of reference that best explains how he or she may so successfully expand this frame to include Native American material” (162). This is another intriguing and optimistic argument. However, while it may make sense intuitively, it is nonetheless difficult to substantiate. This is especially true because Rainwater is highly selective in this part of her analysis, limiting her brief discussion to the mainstream audiences recent interest in alternative healing practices and holistic medicine. She does not consider other factors, positive or negative, that might also potentially affect how contemporary readers approach American Indian fiction and whether or not their reading experiences produce lasting effects. Unfortunately, there is no necessary correlation between dominant culture’s interest in holistic medicine and its interest in supporting American Indian arts or American Indian political and social causes. To my thinking, such claims distract from the intellectual rigor and genuine insights of Rainwater’s textual analysis.

Chadwick Allen

The Limits of Multiculturalism: Interrogating the Origins of American Anthropology by Scott Michaelsen. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1999. ISBN 0-8166-3247-2. 280 pages.

Scott Michaelsen’s *The Limits of Multiculturalism: Interrogating the Origins of American Anthropology* could easily escape the notice of most scholars and teachers of American Indian literatures. Michaelsen does not attend to the contemporary writing that concerns most Native American scholarship, nor does he focus primarily upon the genres of writing—novels, poems, autobiographies—that literary studies most often take as their objects. However, *The Limits of Multiculturalism* makes two crucial efforts that could potentially alter the shape of Native American literary criticism. First, Michaelsen carefully examines and contextualizes the anthropological prose written not just *about* but *by* American Indians during the historical period when anthropology became constituted as a distinct field—roughly the 1820s to the 1860s.

Second, the book takes up this body of writing to critique ideas that have been fundamental to the practice of Native American studies both in scholarship and in the classroom.

At its core, *The Limits of Multiculturalism* is a call for the end of anthropology. Given the vexed historical relationship between anthropologists and tribal peoples, such an argument will surely sound familiar to scholars of American Indian literatures. What Michaelsen advocates, though, goes beyond dismantling academic departments and changing the practices of social scientists. His critique of anthropology is not simply a reaction to the history of misrepresentation of Indians by non-Indians. Instead, Michaelsen believes we must halt anthropology in the broadest sense: the production of knowledge about cultural, racial, and ethnic identities. He would end not only anthropology, but multiculturalism, and even the concept of “culture” itself.

What makes *The Limits of Multiculturalism* compelling is not this argument itself, but the way the book advances it through sustained, nuanced readings of antebellum texts. In the five chapters that form the main body of the book, Michaelsen juxtaposes Amerindian (his favored term) and white writers engaged in related projects of anthropology, an enterprise broadly construed to include works such as William Apess’s “An Indian’s Looking-Glass for the White Man” (1833) and James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), as well as Henry Rowe Schoolcraft’s *Algic Researches* (1839) and David Cusick’s *Sketches of the Ancient History of the Six Nations* (1827). Through such pairings, the book “constructs hypothetical moments of nineteenth-century representational conflict and crisis” in order to analyze them in terms of current debates over the status and study of alterity (xxv, italics in original). And in each instance, Michaelsen develops textual interpretations to demonstrate what he considers to be the ultimate limit of anthropology: the impossibility of sustaining significant, group-based identities that do not ultimately produce some kind of cultural or racial chauvinism. For this reason, he considers the “antiassimilationist multiculturalism” prevalent in our own time as being a dangerous remnant of this earlier history (15).

Regardless of whether one finally accepts Michaelsen’s indictment of multiculturalism, scholars of American Indian literatures will be impressed by the complexity with which he engages the work of Apess, Cusick, Jane Johnston, Ely S. Parker, Peter Jones, George Copway, and John Rollin Ridge—figures whose work has largely been relegated to the margins, or at least the prehistory, of modern Native American studies. In *The Limits of Multiculturalism*, these writers repeatedly undermine

contemporary assumptions about the relationship of “auto-anthropology” to white anthropology of the other. According to Michaelsen, indigenous anthropologists do not reveal hidden “truths” ignored or misapprehended by non-Indian social scientists; rather, their texts show that “truths” about Indians finally do not exist, because the boundaries presumed to divide whites and Indians constantly dissolve under pressure from this antebellum anthropology. Cusick, for instance, requires the presence of Christopher Columbus in order to narrate Iroquois history (chapter 1); Apess needs to mimic the logic of scientific racialism in order to interrogate the status of whiteness (chapter 2); and Jones and Copway both require stories of Christian conversion in order to elaborate their (dramatically differing) versions of “Indianness” (chapter 4). Each example shows the impossibility of describing logically coherent, distinct identities. “As soon as whites begin to conceptualize Indians (and themselves),” Michaelsen writes, “and as soon as Indians begin to conceptualize whites (and themselves), it is already too late to imagine a real difference” (32).

For this reason, Michaelsen urges us to go beyond paying attention to the history and impact of contact between indigenous peoples and Europeans. Rather, he implores us to forego any kind of intellectual endeavor that presumes there to be any kind of meaningful difference among such groups. “In order to imagine radical equalitarianism,” he contends, “the production of culture—which is anthropology—must find a stop” (31). What would the impact of this argument be on Native American literary studies? To begin, it would require an end to what Michaelsen calls the “project of legitimation: who is an authentic Amerindian, what is authentic Amerindian culture, and, perforce, what is not?” (113-114). My own sense, though, is that American Indian studies of literature have largely moved beyond these questions. What Michaelsen does not explicitly take up in this book is the question of whether Native American literary studies could be sustained as a coherent enterprise if it were to dispense with those critical concepts he targets. For if there are not, as Michaelsen suggests, “Indians” *as such*, how can there be such a thing as “American Indian literature”?

One answer is that we can read Native American texts against the grain of our own received theories about cultural and ethnic identity. The “postindian” works of Gerald Vizenor come most readily to mind as possibilities for such an approach, but I can also imagine that N. Scott Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn*, Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead*, or Sherman Alexie’s short stories could be taught in ways that interrogate the production of knowledge about group-based difference

along the same lines as *The Limits of Multiculturalism*. In fact, it is worth noting that in Michaelsen's book about anthropology (albeit in a broad sense), one of the authors whose work emerges as an unexpected model for this kind of critical inquiry is a novelist: James Fenimore Cooper. Without going into detail about Michaelsen's discussion of Cooper, implicit in his analysis is that the dialogic of narrative fiction can destabilize the pillars of essentialism in more subtle and ultimately revealing ways than other types of prose writing. If Michaelsen can use Cooper to level multiculturalism to its foundations, then surely the contemporary fictions of Native Americans can be engaged in equally provocative ways.

Foregrounding the anti-identitarian—what Michaelsen would call the anti-anthropological—possibilities of Native American literatures would not be, I imagine, a welcome development for everyone in the field. For instance, if we were to abandon “culture,” then what would become of the efforts of Craig S. Womack in *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism* to reorient the field around the relationship between literary production, reception, and tribal sovereignty? Womack himself is a harsh critic of the “nostalgic anthropological view” of tribal cultures in a “pristine” state; however, his study of Creek literature presumes that such a thing as Creek culture exists and argues that there are ways literary texts are tied to the possibility of “creative change” within it (Womack 42). *Red on Red* is predicated upon the notion that Native American literatures and literary criticism should engage with issues of American Indian political sovereignty. It would be, perhaps, unfair to ask Michaelsen to answer whether it is possible to articulate sovereignty after putting a “stop” to the “production of culture,” but that may be the most difficult—and important—question that *The Limits of Multiculturalism* raises for Native American studies. Moreover, if scholars of American Indian literatures attend to the challenges of Michaelsen's book, this question may soon become central to their collective endeavors.

Michael A. Elliott

WORK CITED

Womack, Craig S. *Red on Red. Native American Literary Separatism*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1999.

Alaska Native Writers, Storytellers & Orators: The Expanded Edition. *Alaska Quarterly Review*. Ed. Ronald Spatz, Contributing Eds. Jeane Breinig, Patricia Partnow. 1999. ISBN 0-9673377-1-2 377 pages. \$6.95.

This is an excellent anthology of material from the Native peoples of Alaska. The ground-breaking original edition, published in 1986, was edited by Nora Marks Dauenhauer, Dick Dauenhauer, and Gary Holthaus as a special issue of the *Alaska Quarterly Review*. In this revised edition, the Breinig and Partnow have enhanced and complemented the original to create a first-rate collection. This new edition provides ten works in their original Native languages facing the English translation. These new texts are reinforced by new commentary sections providing cultural and historical background about the Alaska Native oral traditions. The section on contemporary literature has also been expanded with the addition of recent works, and Gerald Vizenor has contributed an entertaining and informative introduction to create a well-rounded, representative volume that will become a standard on many bookshelves.

The anthology is structured into three sections: "Oral Traditions & Written Texts," "Contemporary Works," and "Contexts." The "Oral Traditions" section contains narratives coming out of many of the cultural traditions of Alaska, specifically, Eyak, Haida, Tlingit, Tsimshian, Unangan/Aleut, Alutiiq, Central Yup'ik, St. Lawrence Island Yupik, Inupiaq, Dena'ina, Gwichin, and Koyukon. Many of Alaska's most well-known storytellers are included, such as Austin Hammond, Anna Nelson Harry, Peter Kalifornsky, Willie Marks, and Shem Pete. The editors have worked hard to create an outstanding presentation of the wide variety of oral narratives. It includes examples of the most popular story types and Native oral genres as well as potlatch funeral speeches, historical narratives and Raven stories. The selection also foregrounds some of the best translations: those most valued by their respective communities. The addition of Native language texts enhances the selection by making it more inclusive of the differing cultural groups of Alaska and more representative of the types of material available today. Moreover, it acknowledges the importance of continuing language traditions in Alaska. The new texts also make the selection more representative of the various cultural traditions. Taken as a whole it is an exceptionally sound introduction to Alaska Native oral traditions.

In the second section entitled "Contemporary Works," the editors

have included recent material by ten Alaska Native writers not represented in the first edition. They have also added new works by some of the writers presented in the first volume. The addition of the pieces of fiction helps open up a broader perspective on the accomplishment of Native writers in the last decades of the twentieth century. These works reveals the landscapes and cultures of Alaska as alive and thriving and form a perfect counterpoint to a similar focus apparent in many of the oral narratives in the volume.

The last section, "Contexts," presents the most unique aspect of the revised and expanded edition. Here the editors have supplemented previous commentary on oral traditions with some excellent short essays on translation, Native genres, political perspectives, literary frameworks, and the distinctions between oral and written narratives. These informative pieces orient the general reader toward an appreciation of oral tradition, while providing a broad outlook on some of the cultural and scholarly discourse that surround the texts. Too often well-meaning editors have settled for just presenting material and not offering any context building for Native oral narratives. This tactic has seem to me to be an abdication of their responsibility to help readers get the most out of the narratives. Some inexperienced readers of Native oral narratives find themselves confused and lost after they have finished a Native American story. The editors have given enough general information to ground the reader, but they have also given some commentary specific to individual pieces. The end result is that readers are informed but not lectured to.

The volume is also adorned with photographs of Alaska Native arts and crafts, and the lists of "Selected Sources" and "Suggested Further Reading" provide an excellent resource for those interested in learning more about Alaska Native Literature.

Weighing in at almost twice the original size, this new and expanded volume is the single best way to introduce yourself or your students to Alaska Native Literature. This is the perfect book for curling up next to the fire on a long winter night at forty degrees below zero or for reading while sitting outside under the midnight sun. Alaska and her peoples can be proud of this volume, and at \$6.95 it is a bargain. I thought the winter had just begun, but now I've chewed off part of it.

James Ruppert

Contributors

Chadwick Allen is the current Vice President of ASAIL and an Assistant Professor of English at Ohio State University, where he teaches postcolonial and American Indian literatures.

Laura J. Beard received her BA in English literature from Carleton College and her MA and PhD in Hispanic literatures from The Johns Hopkins University. She spent the 1999-2000 academic year as a Fulbright Senior Scholar in Mexico. She is currently an Associate Professor at Texas Tech University where she teaches Spanish, Portuguese, Women's Studies, Comparative Literature, and Latin American and Iberian Studies. Her main research and teaching interests include women writers of the Americas, narrative theories and feminist theories. She is a co-editor of the comparative literature journal *INTERTEXTS*.

Susan Bernardin teaches American and American Indian literature at the University of Minnesota, Morris. She has published articles on early and contemporary Native writers, and is co-author of *Empire of the Lens: Anglo-American Women, Photography, and American Indians*, forthcoming.

ing (2001) from Rutgers University Press.

Michael A. Elliott is an assistant professor of English at Emory University.

Robin Riley Fast has written *The Heart as a Drum: Continuance and Resistance in American Indian Poetry* (U of Michigan P, 1999). She teaches literature at Emerson College.

Connie Jacobs is an assistant professor of English at San Juan College, a school bordering the northern boundary of the Navajo Nation. She teaches composition and literature to a student population which is 30% Native American. Her full-length study of the works of Louise Erdrich, *Stories of Her People: The Novels of Louise Erdrich*, will be published by Peter Lang in 2001. Also scheduled for a 2001 publication is MLA's *Approaches to Teaching the Fiction and Poetry of Louise Erdrich* which she co-edited with Greg Sarris and Jim Giles.

Dean Rader is chair of the department of English and Communication Studies at Texas Lutheran University, where he teaches American literature, American Indian literature, and film. He is co-editing, with Janice Gould, *Speak to Me Words: Essays on Contemporary American Indian Poetry*. An article on Contemporary American Indian Poetry and visual culture is forthcoming in *MELUS*.

Kimberly Musia Roppolo, of Cherokee, Choctaw, and Creek descent, is a doctoral student at Baylor University, specializing in Native American Literature, and a full-time instructor at McLennan Community College. She served as the 1999-2000 President of Baylor's Native American Student Association and is a member of Wordcraft Circle, ACA/PCA, the Western Literature Association, the American Indian Philosophy Association, and the Association for the Study of American Indian Literatures. Her first creative writing publication, "Selections from Breeds and Outlaws," will appear in Editor Robert Benson's *Children of the Dragonfly*. She has also published reviews in *News from Indian Country* and *Studies in American Indian Literatures*. She has other poems and articles scheduled in upcoming publications, including a special Native Women's issue of *Hypatia* and a Native American issue of *Paradoxa*. Kimberly resides in Hewitt, Texas with her husband and three children. She anticipates taking her degree in May 2001.

James Ruppert is a Professor of English and Alaska Native Studies at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. He is a past president of ASAIL and a frequent contributor of articles on Native American Literature. He is the co-author of *Nothing but the Truth: An Anthology of Native American Literatures* from Prentice Hall.

Dr. **Michelle Campbell Toohey** is an assistant professor at Westmoreland County Community College where she teaches college writing, advanced composition, speech, and literature. She has published in *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment* and *Studies in the Humanities*. She has also written a chapter for *Exploring the Lost Boundaries: Critical Essays on Mary Austin*, recently published by Nevada Press.