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On sacred ground: medicine people in Native American Fiction

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**ON SACRED GROUND:
MEDICINE PEOPLE IN NATIVE AMERICAN FICTION**

A dissertation

submitted by

Brianna Burke

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in

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Abstract
On Sacred Ground: Medicine People in Native American Fiction

“On Sacred Ground” argues that the contentious representation of medicine people and religion in Native-authored fiction reveals the complex politics surrounding cultural and religious vitality in Native American communities. N. Scott Momaday writes in *The Man Made of Words* that “what most threatens the American Indian is sacrilege, the theft of the sacred”; he calls this a “subtle genocide” that deprives Native peoples of “spiritual nourishment.” Although aware that providing religious information in fiction is risky, all of the authors I discuss—Susan Power, James Welch, Sherman Alexie, Anna Lee Walters, Louis Owens, Leslie Marmon Silko and Louise Erdrich—include medicine people and ceremonies in their work and therefore must negotiate the ground between commercial success and tribal duty. These writers disagree about the role of the artist as a spokesperson for his/her people and about how to treat a mainstream, commercial reading audience. In the work of each writer, I argue, the representation of medicine people and ceremonial practices reveals divergent cultural values and political ideologies that ultimately affect cultural survival.

Chapter one, “A Religious Education in Susan Power’s *The Grass Dancer*,” shows how Power radically alters mainstream readers’ perceptions of the world by confronting them with material incomprehensible in a Western, scientific context. Using Anthony Appiah’s theory of “thick translation,” Reed Way Dasenbrock’s ideas about what constitutes intelligibility and meaningfulness in multicultural literature, and Louis Owens’s frank discussion of the perils of writing for two audiences

simultaneously, I argue that *The Grass Dancer* performs a profound act of cultural translation. Through relentless repetition and careful teaching, medicine figures become naturalized in the novel and their role in tribal life comprehensible to non-Native readers. Power's novel performs a transformative act that challenges dominant ideology by walking a fine line that illustrates it is possible for Native writers to write about religious beliefs without betraying sacred information.

My second chapter, "Commercial Concessions in James Welch and Sherman Alexie," demonstrates how two incredibly popular authors—James Welch and Sherman Alexie—fall victim to the stereotypes dominant society perpetuates of Native American religions even while working to undermine them. In *Fools Crow*, Welch, trapped by the historical frame of his novel, portrays medicine people and Blackfeet religious beliefs as belonging to a lost romantic past. Alexie in *Reservation Blues* attempts to undermine the readers' expectations by creating a medicine person who breaks all stereotypes but who, as a result, is emptied of any religious values. Both of these novels traffic in what Renato Rosaldo calls "cultural nostalgia," and lend credibility to false constructions that undermine the struggle to protect Native religious beliefs.

Chapter three, "Deliberate Silences in 'Bicenti' by Anna Lee Walters and *The Sharpest Sight* by Louis Owens," examines writers who believe religious matters should remain sacred. Both Walters and Owens include medicine people as well as events or pieces of reality that cannot be absorbed into any EuroAmerican frame of reference while refusing to explain religious ideology, a political statement in itself. This is particularly poignant in "Bicenti," which has an unseen medicine person who

causes all of the events in the narrative, thereby disrupting “semiotic and epistemological boundaries of defining Indian and non-Indian realities,” according to Catherine Rainwater. Owens, in *The Sharpest Sight*, includes two medicine people who drive the narrative, yet never explains their beliefs and how their medicine works. Both Walters and Owens withhold tribal cosmology, declaring to mainstream readers that there is some information too sacred to disclose in fiction, and create narratives that argue Native artists should begin writing for their own people.

My final chapter, “The Danger in Misappropriation: Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony* and Louise Erdrich’s ‘Love Medicine,’” deals with two extremely popular, well-known writers and their vociferous argument about how Native American fiction should treat spiritual material. Silko and Erdrich disagree about how to portray religious figures, what medicine people are capable of, and the boundaries that they operate within. Published seven years after *Ceremony*, “Love Medicine” is Erdrich’s sharp retort to Silko’s postulation that ceremonies can be altered to fit circumstance and her rejection of the idea that *Ceremony* itself is a healing ceremony. “Love Medicine” argues that this view is naïve and incredibly dangerous, resulting in disastrous consequences for those who meddle in medicine without having the proper assent and training.

What is most important to understand about these texts is how meaning is “refracted by cosmology”—to use indigenous scholar and fiction writer Thomas King’s words—whenever a medicine person appears. Throughout my work, I emphasize that medicine people in modern Native American fiction are surrounded by controversy that shows cultures returning to indigenous roots while negotiating

the space between cultural values and the realities of capitalistic American life. How the texts I discuss negotiate this terrain shows the various approaches Native artists use to interact with dominant ideology and define new identities that are both urban and traditional, all the while working for cultural revitalization.

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Introduction Signifying the Sacred

Ironically, for the novelist writing with a consciousness of responsibility as a member of a living Native American culture, this irreversible metamorphosis from oral, communal literature to the written commodity of published work may be an essential objectification. The form of the novel may thus represent a necessary “desacralization” of traditional materials, a transformation that allows sacred materials—from ritual to myth—to move into the secular world of decontextualized “art.”

--Louis Owens, *Other Destinies*

Wandering around the Harvard Peabody Museum of Archeology and Ethnology at the age of seventeen, my father came across the Omaha Sacred Pole standing in a case. Umoⁿhoⁿti, or the Real Omaha, had been held in trust by the Peabody since 1888, and my father and I were there when he returned home over a hundred years later in 1989.¹ I was ten at the time, and watched as Umoⁿhoⁿti was driven up to the dance arena on the Omaha reservation, Macy, escorted in front and behind by police cars. The arbor was silent as Umoⁿhoⁿti was unwrapped and placed in the west in front of the emcee stand, and I remember very clearly that the dance circle wasn't as full as it should have been. I was too young to understand then, but the return of Umoⁿhoⁿti had divided the Omaha. Since he had been gone for so long, the rituals associated with keeping him had been lost to time. Some felt that because he couldn't be properly cared for, his return invited bad things to happen, and so they stayed away from the arbor on that sunny, July day. Others argued that he would understand, and his return was important not only because he

belonged with his people, but also because it was a victory for all tribes fighting for the repatriation of sacred items in the years before NAGPRA had been passed.

The story of the Pole's journey—from the Omaha, to Harvard, and back again—exemplifies the many problems tribes across this country confront in maintaining religious vitality and ceremonial traditions. Originally sent to Harvard to protect him from the devastation wrought by federal relocation and the ensuing poverty and disease, the return of Umo'ho'ti shows that the controversy over how to revitalize or maintain religious traditions can be divisive, even within tribal groups. His journey also shows the wounds caused when religious items—and by extension, ceremonies—are removed from their tribal origins and fall into the possession of people who might not understand how to read, or treat, this material. For example, when my father first saw the Pole in the Harvard Peabody Museum, the medicine bundles originally used to honor him were open at his feet, their sacred contents available for full view, an unspeakable violation that demonstrated the irreverence, or simple ignorance, of the museum staff, and an act that put everyone in the museum, including visitors, in danger. Many tribes believe that tremendous reprisals accompany the misuse and disrespect of the sacred. It is no surprise then that when issues revolving around religious matters arise in literature the conversations about it are equally divisive and complex, often causing conflict between writers, or between writers and their own tribal communities.

In this dissertation, I focus on medicine people to show exactly how complex the fight over religion in Native American cultures is, particularly when represented in fiction meant for commercial consumption. I discuss *The Grass Dancer* (1994) by

Susan Power, *Fools Crow* (1986) by James Welch, *Reservation Blues* (1995) by Sherman Alexie, *Ceremony* (1977) by Leslie Marmon Silko, “Love Medicine” (1984) by Louise Erdrich, “Bicenti” (1991) by Anna Lee Walters, and *The Sharpest Sight* (1992) by Louis Owens, in order to encompass a wide variety of issues through authors who are from various tribal backgrounds and who occupy diverse positions within Native American cultural identity politics. Throughout, I rely on Indigenous theory and distinct tribal cosmologies, working within Native worldviews to illuminate the various ways medicine figures inflect the narratives that contain them, framing my work almost solely within the Native American intellectual tradition. This isn’t always easy, since there are vast differences among tribal religions. But they all believe in balance and reciprocity, an idea the texts I examine return to repeatedly, and that commonality explains why authors often use medicine people as characters in their narratives. In Native life, medicine people help maintain balance; they act as “living mediators of the ceremonial traditions” (Sequoya 459), and are integral parts of traditional tribal communities. It is no mistake, then, that medicine people appear in texts that also address exactly how environmentally and socially unbalanced the world has become. When portrayed in Native American fiction, medicine people symbolize complex cosmologies and tribal beliefs about how the world works and the purpose of the human in such a world, all reduced to one figure. How they are positioned within these texts tells us a great deal about tribal

When these figures appear in Native-authored fiction, “meaning is refracted by cosmology,” to use Thomas King’s beautiful phrase (112). Indigenous authors consistently argue that religious worldviews are inseparable from Native cultural life

and influence everything from art to politics. Jocks writes in “Spirituality for Sale,” that “Traditional American Indian communities do not conceive of ‘religious knowledge’ apart from its complex relations with other domains, including economics and politics. There is no knowledge other than what is lived out, and there is no living out that is not political and historical” (425). Because religious views are fundamentally embedded in traditional life, reading an author’s work often becomes a matter of measuring how embedded a writer is in his/her own tribal belief systems. For the most part in this dissertation, however, I avoid conversations about “authenticity” because I believe there is no way to measure such a thing. Rather than divide communities based on blood quantum and the identity politics caused by federal policies, I take as a given that Native American identities are fluid and relational. What is important for this dissertation is that by using medicine people as characters, all of the writers I discuss clearly position their work in relation to their tribal religious beliefs, whether half-blood, full blood, urban, or reservation, and this signals that religious vitality remains an issue within Native communities regardless of the attempts to eradicate their cultural worldviews either through centuries of genocide or modern legislation. Books such as *Spirit Wars* by Ronal Neizen or *The Handbook of American Indian Religious Freedom* by Christopher Vecesy (to name two) show exactly how local, state, and federal government politics continue to perpetrate cultural genocide, an issue all of these writers address in some form. Remarkably, despite all opposition, the struggle to practice and perpetuate Indigenous ceremonial ways, as well as to protect the sacred sites where they take place, continues.

Of pressing concern in the battle for religious survival today are the theft and commercialization of Indigenous religious beliefs, a practice that is supported by, and works hand-in-hand with, legal cultural genocide. In *The Man Made of Words*, N. Scott Momaday declares, “what most threatens the American Indian is sacrilege, the theft of the sacred” (76). Usually perpetrated by the New Age Spiritual movement under the auspices of “freedom of religion,” this theft and commercialization—performed by what Wendy Rose calls “White Shamans”—has become an incredibly lucrative business in the United States. Exclusive resorts charge up to \$5000 for a weekend filled with sweat ceremonies, drum circles, and “sacred” chants. In her article on this immoral industry, Lisa Aldred cites, among other religious violations, “Sun dances held on Astroturf, sweats held on cruise ships with wine and cheese served, and sex orgies advertised as part of ‘traditional Cherokee ceremonies’” (333).² Just after I started writing this dissertation, the infamous incident where three people died and sixteen were injured in a Whiteshaman sweatlodge in Sedona, Arizona, had just occurred,³ and the *Twilight* phenomenon—which portrays Indian peoples as, once again, the sources of some kind of mystical knowledge and magical power—became too ubiquitous in the media for anyone to ignore.⁴ This dissertation began, in part, because I was interested in how Native writers might inadvertently contribute to this process of theft by portraying ceremonies and spiritual beliefs in fiction meant for commercial consumption.

Although my focus shifted to think about the political positions within Indigenous cultural politics these authors use medicine people to claim, the theft of Native religious beliefs remains a central concern to this work. As tribes struggle to

maintain religious vitality and instruct their young people in tribal values, bastardized spiritual beliefs are omnipresent in popular culture and often cause young people to feel ashamed of tribal religions. In addition, misusing ceremonial practices has serious consequences, as the New Age Spiritual movement often fails to comprehend. For many Native Americans, it was not surprising that people died in the faux ceremony in Sedona—these are the consequences you invite when you call the spirits to your aid and then do not know how to guide them properly. A pipe carrier and Sun Dancer for the Lakota people explained it to me with an analogy that I think bears repeating. He said that calling the spirits or using medicine is like playing with a loaded gun, and then shooting it into the air: if you don't know how to guide that bullet (the spirits), you never know who it is going to hit.⁵ Further, the danger invited by misuse is not limited to those present at the time. As Robert Redsteer declares in his “Open Epistle to Dr. Traditional Cherokee of the Nonexistent Bear Clan,” people who misuse medicine “put us *all* at risk” (378, emphasis mine). In addition, sacrilege leads to ceremonial degradation, or the belief that the ceremonies handed down for generations will no longer work as they once did, yet another form of cultural genocide.

To prevent misuse, there are strict tribal taboos against sharing sacred information, and many tribes believe that breaking this taboo is doubly dangerous: it can lead to the violation of ceremonial practices as mentioned above, and it can invite severe punishment from the spirit world. In dealing with religious ideology, all of the writers I discuss must negotiate this taboo. The prohibition against revealing sacred matter is taken very seriously, and so the use of sacred material or religious

beliefs in the novels I discuss is deadly serious. By using this information, these authors tread on sacred ground. They do so very carefully, but in the end how they use medicine people and religious beliefs always shows how they view themselves and their own identities within the spectrum of Indigenous cultural politics.

In fact, positioning themselves in relation to tribal knowledge is one of the ways these writers establish themselves as *Native* authors. It is no mistake that for many of the writers included in this dissertation—Susan Power, Sherman Alexie, Leslie Marmon Silko, Louise Erdrich, and Louis Owens—all do this in their *first novels*, joining the conversation and voicing opinions on a number of issues within Indigenous cultural politics from the very beginning. In every case—and there is a great variety—the authors take a stand on how to represent religious beliefs in the form of a medicine person, which is not an artistic choice only, I argue, but a deeply political and spiritual declaration about what may or may not be expressed.

In my first chapter, “Radical Enculturation in *The Grass Dancer* by Susan Power,” I discuss how Power radically alters mainstream readers’ perceptions of the world by confronting them with material incomprehensible in a Western, scientific context. Using Anthony Appiah’s theory of “thick translation,” Reed Way Dasenbrock’s ideas about what constitutes intelligibility and meaningfulness in multicultural literature, and Louis Owens’s frank discussion of the perils of writing for two audiences simultaneously, I argue that *The Grass Dancer* performs a profound act of cultural translation. Through relentless repetition and careful teaching, medicine figures become naturalized in the novel and their role in tribal life comprehensible to non-Native readers. Power’s novel performs a transformative act

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dangerous, resulting in disastrous consequences for those who meddle in medicine without having the proper assent and training.

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Throughout my work, I emphasize that medicine people in modern Native American fiction are surrounded by controversy that shows cultures returning to Indigenous roots while negotiating the space between Native cultural values and the realities of capitalistic American life. How the texts I discuss negotiate this terrain shows the various approaches Native artists use to interact with dominant ideology and define new identities that are both contemporary and traditional, all the while

working for cultural revitalization. This work isn't always easy, and as my dissertation shows, it doesn't mean these texts are not flawed. But the fact that they engage in the fight over religious survival at all is, I believe, a sign of great hope for the future.

Chapter One:

Radical Enculturation in *The Grass Dancer* by Susan Power

I do not lecture; that is not how I learn or how I teach. Instead I tell them stories and try to place them behind my eyes so they can look out at the world as I do. . . . I tell the students that everything is potentially alive; in my world everything is capable of spirit.

-- Susan Power, *The Table Loves Pain*

In *The Grass Dancer* (1997) Susan Power creates a polyphonic web of interconnected characters, a community of Dakota people interrelated and intertwined. Often mislabeled a collection of short stories because each chapter is a complete narrative on its own, together the stories coalesce to alter the non-Native reader's worldview. Through increasingly complicated acts of cultural translation, Power acculturates non-Native readers into Dakota religious beliefs to the point where they understand the cultural ideology of her text and view each event as contextualized by that worldview. As I discuss in later chapters, some authors choose not to explain religious material at all, barring access to many readers, while others portray medicine people as strange mystical figures. *The Grass Dancer*, however, teaches the reader outside of Indigenous cultures how to view and understand these figures without explaining what they *do*,⁶ and—for careful readers—even teaches them how to behave with respect if ever in a tribal setting. Growing in popularity among scholars and being taught with more frequency, it is an ideal novel to begin examining how medicine people are portrayed in Native American fiction because it is so successful in explaining complicated spiritual beliefs to a non-Native reader while reaching an Indigenous audience as well. In addition, it

also shows how it is possible to educate non-Native readers about Native American religious beliefs without betraying tribal taboos about sacred information. Indeed, Power argues that it is necessary for writers to break this silence in order to foster cross-cultural communication.

In *The Grass Dancer*, the reader enters a world completely outside of the laws assumed to govern the universe in a western-scientific worldview. Ghosts speak. Medicine people wield incredible power. History folds in on itself. Spoken words bind or heal. Susan Power never attempts directly to explain the events in her stories to cultural outsiders, which would involve lengthy treatises on religious ideology and perhaps require her to explain how medicine people work—all of which is dangerous because it allows for the possibility of replication and misappropriation. Instead, Power performs an act of profound cultural translation that is two-fold, making Dakota religious beliefs accessible to a mainstream, largely white, western, Euroamerican audience while simultaneously protecting those beliefs from possible misappropriation. To produce these cultural translations, Power first uses Dakota words selectively throughout the text, many of which become part of the working vocabulary of the novel; *then* she employs complicated cultural religious concepts which, in the end, may not be fully translatable into English. Rather than attempt a linguistic translation of these concepts, she uses allegorical stories. Employing the traditional practice of storytelling, Power instructs the unfamiliar reader in how to understand medicine people and Dakota religious concepts in a distinctly Native way. Because that worldview, at first, represents a radical departure for the mainstream reader, the stories that require the most cultural knowledge appear late in

the novel, performing a series of loops which bring the reader increasingly closer to the Dakota worldview necessary for understanding. In this way, Power's work operates subversively; she radically disrupts the non-Native reader's cultural context by the end of the novel and inducts him/her into a whole new way of seeing and knowing.

Red Dress, fierce ancestor, woman warrior, and ghost who haunts this text embodies Susan Power's purpose, serving as a cultural translator in the novel. As Red Dress visits her descendants throughout the narration, her voice splits, doubles, and *echoes*, entering into conversation with itself. For example, when she appears to Calvin Wind Soldier during his *hanbdec'eya*,⁷ Power writes that she "spoke in English and Dakota simultaneously. . . . Not translating, but two messages at once" (206). Jacqueline Vaught Brogan argues that this doubling of voice calls attention to the distance between the two languages, or the impossibility of translating Indigenous concepts into English. She also asserts that these two voices conflict in the novel and are radically distinct, one "palatable to a white audience," and the other subversive, and she sees them as ultimately "incompatible" (120). However, this reading fails to recognize how the reader, like Calvin, is taught to understand *both* of these voices, to use them together to understand the text. Far from "incompatible," I argue, these voices work in tandem throughout the novel: Power uses her Dakota voice to introduce Dakota religious ideology and her English voice to translate those concepts so readers can enter the world as it is seen and experienced by Dakota people. In doing so, Power mirrors Red Dress's role as an Indigenous translator, a position historically inflected by assumed divided loyalties and precarious social

belonging. As if to erase these doubts before they arise, Red Dress muses about her work as a translator and states, “when I translat[e] inaccurately it [is] not out of carelessness or spite” but instead out of “loyalty” and in the attempt to “*find a voice of my own*” (Power 243, emphasis mine). This voice, Power suggests, is polyphonic, multivalent, and integrative, like the novel. To understand how Power teaches the readers using these multiple voices, it is important first to look at some of the issues that arise when translating Native American languages and concepts into English and the way Power navigates this difficult terrain.

The Problems with Translation

First, the term “translation” is partially inadequate, because Power does not wholly translate one language into another but, rather, makes them work together side-by-side or in dialog with one another. Second, “translation” does not encompass the full breadth of what Power accomplishes in this novel, since her “translation” is not limited solely to linguistic translation but also to what I will call “cultural translation”—that is, the transference of complicated cultural meaning from one culture into another which may not have the referents at hand to decode such a concept. We often think of translation as a direct one-to-one correlation: here is the word, called the “source language” in translation studies, here is its counterpart, called the “target language.” For example, multiple times in the text Susan Power uses the word “*wastunkala*,” translated directly after as “corn soup” (22, 99, italics original). Translating the source language, Dakota, into the target language, English, isn’t hard in this case because “wastunkala” is a simple noun, a thing. These

simple nouns force the reader to become increasingly comfortable with Dakota terms and allow Power to progress almost seamlessly from simple nouns to more complicated cultural concepts later in the text.

Those more complicated cultural concepts raise the issue of who is doing the translating, which is crucially important when considering Native texts. As many scholars point out, translation is always ideologically inflected. Helen Carr contends in *Inventing the American Primitive* that translation reveals the desires of the culture doing the translating. “In all cases the texts are inscribed by the guilt, anxiety and evasion” (4) the dominant culture feels towards the subordinated group, which is why Eric Cheyfitz argues that translation itself is an act of “exceptional violence,” an act of domination through the control of meaning (141). In his study of early Native American texts, Cheyfitz remarks that each translation is a “romance of translation, in which, like the Indians of the Marshall Court’s decisions, the other is translated into the terms of the self in order to be alienated from those terms” (15). In this way, he argues, America defines itself by creating fantasies of Native peoples as both a part of the nation and irreducibly “other” at the same time. Of course, many Native scholars argue that this interpretive violence does not just happen in literal, textual translation but has historically occurred and continues to occur in much of the academic work done on Native peoples in the social sciences by cultural outsiders.⁸

The violence Cheyfitz argues is inherent in translation is doubly problematic when considering Native texts, because translation in this case does not just signify translating meaning alone, or inflecting it with hegemonic ideology. It also refers to

the literal transformation of Indigenous language into English, which according to Native beliefs about language enacts a different kind of “violence.” Native scholars, writers, poets, and elders emphasize that language itself has a physical effect in the world, particularly prayers or ceremonies. Unlike postmodern theorists, who argue that the word and the thing it signifies are irremediably separated, Native people believe words can *make things happen*. This is the very definition of “ceremony” and becomes a particularly contentious issue when considering the fine line between ceremony and sacred stories, which can also set a process in motion. Stories, writes Kenneth Lincoln, are not reiterated tales, but “ceremonial sites countlessly revisited” because words “connect inside with outside . . . inhaled and exhaled as the expressed soul” (11, 56). Native writers who include ceremonies, medicine people, sacred stories, or religious beliefs in their novels must be incredibly careful in deciding what is sacred and what is not, because the difference can be slight and requires deep cultural knowledge. As Lee Irwin notes, “sacred utterances . . . were regarded as extremely powerful and dangerous, and their proper use was mandatory to avoid negative consequences” (239). Although Irwin uses the past tense because his article considers Cherokee texts from 1915, the belief that language has a physical effect is still integral to Indigenous religions across this country. This belief means the very act of re-telling a story can become dangerous *itself*, particularly when using Indigenous language as Susan Power does in *The Grass Dancer*. In addition, translation of words from Indigenous languages into English causes the words to lose their power. This places Indigenous people who depend on these ceremonies

for well-being and spiritual health at risk, which is yet again another form of violence enacted against Native peoples that, like assimilation, is vested in cultural genocide.

Just because a Native speaker is the translator does not necessarily preclude this violence or make the act of translation any easier. Choctaw author Louis Owens asserts that for Native authors, writing in English “requires two ways of knowing” and often results in “linguistic torsions” that illustrate the distance of the writer from the English language and the ideology it necessarily contains, and also risks alienating the reader (*Other Destinies* 9, 15). Further, he argues translation itself is not necessarily positive, worrying that what the text “signifies remains locked away in cultural distance,” inaccessible to the reader (*Mixedblood Messages* 49). This is particularly problematic, Eric Cheyfitz adds, when Native writers are not wholly fluent in their own languages. He writes, “problems of translation exist here as well, perhaps most acutely here, where the place of the person in the culture is also the place of the person between cultures” (xvi). While I agree with Cheyfitz that Native writers who were raised away from their tribes confront difficulties when using Indigenous tongues within their work, I also think there is no one better qualified to translate or reduce the gap between two cultures than those who reside in both. They mediate bi-cultural space for themselves as well as their readers, and the struggle itself is edifying.

When Susan Power translates, she takes the reader with her and unsettles his/her cultural frame, creating what James Ruppert calls a “mediated text.” “Mediation,” he writes, “produces a text in which various languages contend and are mutually translated” (14). Yet in Power’s “mediated” text, the languages—Dakota

and English—are not *mutually* translated, even while in constant dialog. When Calvin Wind Soldier hears both of Red Dress’s voices at once, he describes them as: “the voice speaking Dakota was low, from deep in the throat, and the part speaking English was breathy and high” (Power 206). Here, Calvin makes clear that the Dakota language lies beneath all else, a low murmur bubbling up through English, providing a foundation. In the same way, Power uses Dakota to lay the foundation for the worldview she presents in her text, eventually immersing her readers within that worldview completely. Her novel argues, in fact, that Indigenous people have had to translate everything into western ideology for far too long, and it is time for non-Native readers to make the journey in the opposite direction, with a translator and guide. The fact that Power chooses to translate religious concepts illustrates her commitment to changing mainstream readers’ points of view, because she risks condemnation from her own people for talking about sacred matters. As Vanessa Holford Diana notes in her recent article on *The Grass Dancer*, many critics “still advocate traditional Western literary criticism approaches that seek universal understanding and de-emphasize cultural context” (4). Yet, *The Grass Dancer* proves that providing cultural context creates the space for cross-cultural dialog that more “universalist” approaches flatten—particularly when “universal” implies “comprehensible” to mainstream society and is thereby entrenched in dominant ideology.

Vine Deloria, Jr., for example, believes that cultural translation is simply not possible. In *God Is Red*, he reasons that outsiders cannot understand Native religion because they are unable to move beyond the image of Indians and “Indianness” they

themselves have created. He is not alone in this assertion, although it seems tantamount to declaring cross-cultural communication impossible, which would nullify his very reasons for writing. Like Deloria, Christopher Ronwanièn:te Jocks⁹ in his discussion of how Native spirituality has been marketed for consumption by illegitimate practitioners, asks if translation is even possible when the perception of reality for Native peoples and mainstream society is irreconcilable. He asserts that when discussing religious matters “distortion” occurs due to “inappropriate external categories” or “frames of reference” (418). The only way to prevent this, he declares, is through mutual respect and understanding, which is impossible due to the continuing unequal power relations between Indigenous people and the United States.

Taking a different position on this issue of cultural translation, Susan Power in *The Grass Dancer* “endeavors to move the readers implied by the text to question the way they form knowledge and meaning, but in the end it seeks to reeducate those readers so that they can understand two codes, two traditions of discourse” (Ruppert 11). I argue that Power forces the reader to view the novel in *Dakota* terms and achieves what Kenneth Lincoln calls a “translative fusion” of linguistic forms, two voices speaking at once, and it is important to note that her word choice and their skillful placement throughout the text is not arbitrary (11). After all, Susan Power does have a degree from Harvard Law School and learned to use language with precision during her time there. The Dakota terms are usually italicized, which sets them apart as foreign or alien, but noting their difference is precisely the point. Multicultural texts often confront readers with culturally unintelligible moments

which do not always “preclude meaningfulness” according to Reed Way Dasenbrock (315). There is a difference between “meaningful” and “intelligible” he argues, and readers learn about their social/cultural positions when confronted with something unintelligible. Andrea Optiz, in her reflection on translating Blackfoot writer James Welch into German, shows that the unintelligibility of Indigenous language in the text serves a useful purpose by “unsettling the reader’s expectations and comfort zone” which is “necessary for successful discourse and exchange between two cultures” (137). This unsettling forces the reader to reach for meaning, or translate terms using context, as all readers do when confronted with a new word for the first time. However, in the case of Power’s novel, the context provided to translate the terms is not just linguistic but also cultural, supplied by the accumulation of stories in the novel.

By naturalizing some of the Dakota words through repetition and simultaneously dropping the special formatting (*italics*) that sets the words apart as “other” to English, Power writes for both Dakota cultural insiders and outsiders. As the novel progresses, she becomes selective about whether or not she translates at all, forcing the reader to define a given word, as with the Dakota term *wasicuns* (white people), which is never directly translated; instead, its meaning is implied, rendering direct translation unnecessary (141, 165, 263, 277). Eventually, the most important Dakota religious concepts untranslatable in a simple one-to-one correlation become part of the working vocabulary of the novel. For these terms, rather than use the sentence structure surrounding the word, the reader must use the stories or imagery to translate them successfully. This is what post-colonial critic Anthony Appiah calls

“thick translation”: a translation that does not just give the equivalent of the word but instead gives the cultural referents necessary to understand the meaning of the concept.

The term “Wanagi Tacanku, the Spirit Road” is an example of a complicated cultural concept that, when translated into English, loses some of its meaning (Power 104). To imply this meaning, Power draws a picture of this spiritual belief, writing that Lydia’s voice rose “above the dancer’s heads, above the smoke of cigarettes and burning sage, some thought beyond the atmosphere to that dark place where the air is thin and Wanagi Tacanku, the Spirit Road, begins” (104). Wanagi Tacanku echoes several times in the novel with the ideology behind it—how the dead journey from this world to the next—never explained. It is not necessary. Readers can imagine it for themselves using the image of Lydia’s voice rising from the dusty pow-wow grounds, perhaps comparing it to the Christian notion of heaven, so that by the time Power repeats the word late in the novel, no image is provided; the word is imagined, understood, and thus defined. This is how Power writes for multiple audiences. Readers who understand this concept from the beginning get a beautiful image of their spiritual ideology, without the encumbrance of lengthy explanation that might alienate them from the text by showing they are not the intended ideal audience. At the same time, the visual image gives readers outside of Native cultures the key to comprehension.

Cultural Translation and Medicine People

As the novel progresses, Power uses this technique of selective translation and imagery to educate readers in Dakota religious philosophy, particularly the foundational belief in medicine.¹⁰ Because medicine itself is a particularly difficult concept to translate, Power doesn't define it herself, instead showing through stories how it works. Each tribe has a different origin story for how their people discovered medicine, and each medicine person comes into his/her own powers over time and often through prolonged study with other medicine people. It is important to understand that medicine as a force has no moral judgment associated with it; it is neither "good" nor "bad," it simply is. How medicine people *use* their medicine defines what kind of people they are. In *The Grass Dancer* some use medicine for their own selfish purposes and others use it to heal. Although medicine people appear in almost every chapter, Herod Small War in "The Medicine Hole," Anna Mercury Thunder in "A Hole in the Sheets," and Ghost Horse and Red Dress in "Snakes" show the spectrum of religious ideology that surrounds medicine people in Power's novel.

Power employs the method of selective translation nowhere more artfully than with the term "Yuwipi." In the first chapter, as Frank watches his grandfather, Herod Small War, dance in grand entry at the Dakota Days pow-wow he reflects, "his grandfather, a Yuwipi man, [was] frequently consulted on spiritual matters" (Power 21). Power uses this word in a way that never really defines it, letting the reader glean from context that a Yuwipi man is perhaps a sort of priest, which is a partially true, yet inadequate, explanation. Calling a medicine person a "priest" is as

insufficient as the literal definition of Yuwipi, which is “to tie up,” and which sheds no more light on what a Yuwipi man does than adding that he is “frequently consulted on spiritual matters” (Belle). Yuwipi is one of the many terms Power can only define through allegory and story, performing what Appiah, appropriately in this case, calls an “unfaithful translation,” aimed at preserving the sentiment behind the term rather than the literal translation of it (397). Precisely explaining what a Yuwipi man is would require a full explanation of a medicine person’s abilities, which would be a betrayal of sacred information. Instead, Power does what Walter Benjamin says all successful translators must do, touch “the original lightly and only at the infinitely small point of sense,” by telling a story in the third chapter of *The Grass Dancer* that shows how a Yuwipi man, Herod Small War, functions in relation to his tribe (81).

In “The Medicine Hole,” Archie Iron Necklace has a dream he needs interpreted and as he tells it, Herod Small War realizes it is about a historical event that actually happened in 1877, “a year after the Custer battle” (Power 85). Calling the Battle of the Little Bighorn the “Custer battle” slips the reader into a Dakota version of history where events are not writ large, named, and memorialized as singular events in the timeline of “The History of The Nation,” but are instead contextualized in terms of tribal memory. Archie dreams of four warriors, who, although they are surrounded by cavalry, are able to escape because the earth literally opens up to save them. During the ceremony to interpret the dream, the spirits tell Herod, “*You will find the medicine bole. . . . You will find it*” (87, italics original). Herod sets out with Archie, his grandson Frank, and his grandson’s friend Harley to do

exactly that—find a literal hole in the ground—but the spirits have other plans. The men search in vain all day when suddenly it begins to rain, and as great thunderbolts sizzle down around them, the group is forced to retreat to an abandoned homestead nearby, said to be haunted by a white woman’s ghost. Herod knew this woman and has a history with this place, and his return is no mistake, directed as it is by the Thunder Beings, important figures in Dakota cosmology. In the middle of the night he awakens to feel the ghostly woman’s warmth on his body, and as he watches, she rises and glides through the wall of the house. He runs to the window to ask, “What about the medicine hole? Will I ever find it?” In reply, she points to a hole in the ground where four warriors on horseback wait. One of the warriors responds to Herod, “*You are the medicine hole*” (96, italics original).

Typical of an oral story in Native cultures, the reader is forced to reflect on what this story means in order to understand it, and the lesson is in the last line, which explains exactly what a Yuwipi man does. He *is* the medicine hole, described earlier in the chapter as “pitying us enough to restore us, in body or in spirit. The earth would provide a soothing ointment to take away the pain I felt with every movement” (90). Power, drawing this parallel between Herod and the hole, explains to readers how Yuwipi and medicine men function for their tribes: they heal, bring the people back to a sense of themselves and their place in the world. They act as mediators between the spirit world and the “everyday” one, between the earth and the people. Like the earth, they spiritually and physically sustain the tribe. Power carefully notes for the reader that this is something the white soldiers cannot understand, that it falls outside of what is possible in their worldview. She writes

that when the warriors disappear, the soldiers speculate about how they get away, wildly conjecturing that the Indians must have shape-shifted into eagles or painted themselves with earth and walked silently past the soldiers “in the Indian way they’d heard so much about” (86). The white characters in this novel *misread* what happens. They, unlike the reader, do not have the cultural context to understand; they lack the ability to see in any way other than what the white, western, scientific worldview has told them is possible. They misunderstand the earth’s power and their efforts to kill the warriors are thwarted more than once. Through the comparison of Herod with the medicine hole that saves the warriors, Power argues that medicine people continually, by their very existence, save their fellow tribes-members from destruction at the hands of white society.

This is also precisely why the medicine person in this story is named *Herod* Small War. In the bible, Herod is the King of Judea who orders his magistrates to kill Jesus Christ, then an infant. In his name alone, Herod signals a continuation of this battle against Christianity and the genocide it has perpetrated against Indigenous people on this continent and elsewhere in the world. Through his perpetuation of tribal religion, Herod vehemently repudiates the power of Christianity in the land of the Sioux. This is no “small war” he fights. He is a practitioner of old traditional beliefs, indispensable to tribal life, and, as Power argues in this story, the only thing that stands between Indigenous people and total annihilation.

Although explaining the tribal role of a Yuwipi man is difficult, Power makes it accessible for readers by comparing Herod to both a priest and the medicine hole. However, other Dakota religious beliefs pertaining to medicine itself, such as how it

can be misused and the religious figure of the heyo'ka, Ghost Horse, are not so easily explained. The novel begins educating readers in religious ideology early, preparing them for even more “radical” (for lack of a better term) complicated concepts which take more time and knowledge for dominant-society readers to understand. Before I turn to “Snakes”—arguably the most politically radical and religiously “different” chapter in the novel, where Power’s translations garner mixed results—I first want to look at Anna Mercury Thunder, who represents the darker side of Indigenous beliefs in medicine.

Herod’s use of his medicine to heal is a choice, since medicine itself is not “good” or “bad,” but instead is defined by the intentions of the practitioner. It is tempting for many Native writers when portraying medicine people to stop at the more benevolent representation of their spiritual ideology, because it is reassuring and “safe” for readers. *The Grass Dancer* is more ambitious in its scope. The full spectrum of medicine people in this novel provides a philosophical foundation for the belief in medicine as a concept itself, and gives readers a more encompassing Dakota religious education. If Herod Small War represents what might best be called a “spiritual doctor,” Anna is a “witch”—although, as I’ve noted previously, literal translation fails at the border of medicine peoples’ abilities. In “A Hole in the Sheets,” Jeanette McVay, a white graduate student who appears on the reservation insisting that she be allowed to take part in Herod Small War’s Yuwipi ceremony, ends up at Anna’s kitchen door. Everyone has told her stories about Anna’s power, but in yet another moment where white people misread or lack cultural context in this novel, Jeannette assumes their stories are complimentary. She invites herself

into Anna's kitchen, tells her life story, and declares she is there to study Anna's "magic." This starts a chain of events that do not end well for Jeannette, and which Power uses to show the reader that not all medicine people are healers with good intentions.

Anna shows that the stereotypical image of a Native "shaman" is romantic, that medicine itself is variable, that it is incredibly dangerous when misused, and that its use exacts a price. She represents a religious worldview radically outside the boundaries of what is considered "possible" in western teleology. Non-Native readers may feel threatened by this, and be tempted to reduce her to a fictional character out of Hans Christian Anderson or the Brothers Grimm. Even if fairytales don't always end happily, readers at least can take comfort in a recognizably fictional space. Power refuses this reading, and in order to carefully set up this lesson, she removes the threat Anna poses to such a reader's worldview by transferring it onto Jeannette McVay, an idealistic graduate student with skin so white it is almost transparent and who is a parody of the ridiculous stereotypes dominant society holds and disseminates about Native peoples in general and their spiritual practices in particular.

Because Jeannette bears the punishment for her foolish ideology, the anti-hegemonic critique Anna embodies slips in beneath the story. This is possible in part because Power allows all readers to feel superior to Jeannette both through foreknowledge and by making her appear absurd. After Herod tells her that she can't be part of his Yuwipi ceremony because she is menstruating, rather than ask why, Jeannette responds, "I . . . told him about a few little developments, such as a

woman's right to vote" (163). Her imposition of western political ideology—Herod must be sexist if he doesn't allow her into his sweat lodge—shows that unlike the reader (ideally), Jeannette is incapable of learning from previous encounters and applying what she has learned. Herod refuses to teach her and sends her to Anna, who is not as polite and will not let her get away without learning the ultimate lesson: medicine is real and should be taken seriously.

When Jeannette first arrives in Anna's kitchen, Power emphasizes Jeannette's cultural myopia by having her slip on glasses. Anna asks, "you need to see the words as they come out of your mouth?" to which Jeannette responds, "No . . . I want to see *you*" (161, italics original). In this moment it is almost as if Power invokes Vine Deloria's argument that it is impossible for western society to understand Native religions: Jeannette is literally unable to *see* without her own western ideology occluding her vision like a pair of glasses. Although Anna gently reminds Jeannette to pay attention to her words, a dangerous gift to a woman who knows how to use them properly, Jeannette again misunderstands, reinforcing her cultural blindness, which, Power suggests, is fueled by her scholarly ambitions as a student of archeology, anthropology and mythology. Jeannette professes she has come to the reservation to "meet humanity rather than just slip it under a microscope or flash slides of it across some institutional-green wall" (162). Yet seconds later she remarks, "I need to write this down," proving she will continue this process of domination through scholarly study if allowed to do so (162).

The very precepts of Jeanette's mistaken study persist in the dominant culture and must be dismissed in order for the reader to realize the religious message Anna embodies. Jeannette says to Anna:

I thought this was going to be a thing about death: dead culture, dead language, dead God. I came out here to record the funeral, so to speak. Collect data on how a people integrate this kind of loss into their souls. And you know what? I found all this activity and vitality and living mythology. I feel like I've stumbled on a secret.

(162)

Even as Jeannette appears to recognize the absurdity of her previous thinking, she simultaneously reinforces it by labeling Dakota culture a "living mythology," a contradiction in terms. In doing so, she makes a comparison that "implies ignorance or a malicious intent to defraud" as Paula Gunn Allen puts it, since "*myth* is synonymous with *lie*" (102, italics original). By calling Dakota culture a "living lie," Jeannette negates the reality of what she sees before her, shows her inability to grasp the alternate worldview presented to her, and essentially silences their entire cultural existence. She also freezes living and evolving Dakota culture in the past, a common mistake of ethnologists, notes James Clifford, and an act which linguistically denies the possibility of "a traditional future" (5). The stories people tell her of Anna's power—*warnings*—she calls "legends, really," even if they are "alive and moving upon this earth." "I absorbed the tales," she continues, and "marveled that you were nothing less than Aphrodite, Goddess of Desire" (163). Equating Anna's power to Roman myths is a fatal mistake. She is no Aphrodite. In "A Hole in the Sheets,"

she uses her medicine to cause Chester Brush Horns to fall in love with her and put his life in danger, reads the thoughts of those around her, projects her voice over the entire reservation, transports her spirit from one location to another, and ruins an entire family out of sheer spite “because, after all I could do it” (182). She exercises her power out of capricious whim, simply because she *can*. As she remarks to Jeannette when asked why people don’t come to her for healing: “Herod waits for them to come to him, waits for their tears and their sad little stories, their confusion and illnesses, their fear of death. I enter before they invite me in” (170). Her sarcasm and self-interest set her apart as a very different kind of medicine person, not at all a reassuring healer like Herod.

Like “The Medicine Hole,” the key to translating the religious ideology of “A Hole in the Sheets” lies in the last line: “I am not a fairy tale” (187). In the end, Anna traps Jeannette on the reservation forever, ensuring she will never be able to leave. She tells Jeannette, “Remember Pennsylvania and your college in the East. . . . That is all a *legend* from the past, and here you are where things happen. It is so real now, it is a nightmare, am I right?” (184). Anna instructs her daughter Crystal, “Tell her what happens in this house is not imagined.” Crystal responds, “You aren’t asleep, and this isn’t a story” (185). Power’s goal in this novel is similar to Anna’s in this moment: to destabilize notions of reality and show that all meaning is culturally constructed and *real*. The surreal consumer culture and privilege of East Coast society—which Power experienced herself at Harvard Law School—are legend and myth, a *lie*, no more real to impoverished Native children living on reservations than Anna’s power is to Jeannette. And yet, equally real, and equally dangerous.

In my analysis, I do not mean to imply that Anna is “evil” in the typical western binary influenced by Christianity and western philosophy. Medicine itself does not operate in a binary. In other parts of the novel, the reader feels sympathy for Anna, making her more relatable than she is in this chapter. The stark contrast between Anna and Herod gives readers a more complete picture of medicine itself and how it can be used, and thus a more encompassing understanding of how Dakota people view the world. Whether or not readers actually choose to believe in these views themselves is beside the point; they have no other choice if they want to understand the novel than to embrace what it teaches as real. As Power remarked in an interview with Shari Oslos, “this is not magical realism, this is actual reality to me” (1).

Although I only discuss two chapters here, Herod and Anna reappear constantly throughout the story, involved with other families from the reservation and helping or meddling with their daily lives. *The Grass Dancer* is about a community, not these figures alone, because they do not function in a vacuum within the novel any more than they would in real life. As Herod and Anna reappear in the text, along with the *heyo’ka* Ghost Horse and the medicine woman Red Dress, the reader gets a more comprehensive picture of life for Dakota people and how their spiritual beliefs influence the way they see the world. This education is so complete that by the end of the novel Power no longer needs to explain why events happen, or translate for the reader at all. The reader must apply previous lessons in order to understand the final events of the text.

While Power is incredibly successful in this regard, there are also spiritual concepts in this novel which elude translation entirely, such as the religious figure Ghost Horse who is a *heyo'ka*. Rather than mark a failure of Power's abilities, translation in this case collapses due to the completely foreign nature of these concepts to non-Native readers and the impossibility of encompassing them either in English or with allegory. In other words, Power confronts the untranslatable. As Martha Cutter notes in *Lost and Found in Translation*, "translation creates a syncretic reconciliation between competing cultures, languages, and ideologies" but this "coalescence" of "contradictory systems of language . . . is still marked by internal inconsistencies" (6). *Heyo'ka* is one of those inconsistencies, something that cannot be reduced to language, as if mimicking the nature of the thing itself, although Power attempts it three different times.

The first time, Herod Small War attempts to explain to his grandson's friend Harley what a *heyo'ka* is, but instead fumbles for an answer: "This uncle of yours had a powerful dream, where the thunderbirds appeared to him. He painted the lightning on his arms and legs and his face too. He did everything the opposite of the way it's usually done, and he said what he didn't mean" (68). How is a reader outside of Dakota (or any other Indigenous culture) supposed to make sense of this information? What exactly are "thunderbirds" and why are they significant? Why, if you dream about them, do you have to "do everything opposite"? This is doubly ironic because Herod Small War as a Yuwipi man should be able to explain this idea, since it is directly connected to his own knowledge as a medicine person. Power's second attempt to explain what a *heyo'ka* is comes in visual form through Harley's

attempts to mimic his ancestor's behavior, but a casual reader is still not given enough information or the tools to access this particular cultural phenomenon (68-70). Her final attempt to contextualize the meaning of *heyo'ka* happens when the reader encounters Harley's uncle, Ghost Horse, in the story "Snakes."

"Snakes" is the most subversive story in the novel, and although the reader must employ knowledge learned about Dakota religious beliefs from earlier sections of the text to understand the chapter, what, exactly, a *heyo'ka* is escapes Power once again. She writes:

After dreaming of the giant thunderbirds who could shoot lightning from their glimmering eyes, Ghost Horse had become *heyo'ka*, a sacred clown. His behavior was perverse: he wept at social dances, laughed at solemn events, shivered in the hot summer sun, and sweltered in frigid temperatures. He rushed into battle ahead of other warriors, treating war as play, and he always said the opposite of what he meant. I sensed he was lonely, burdened by this powerful dream, which obligated him to appease the thunderbeings through public humiliation. (244)

Giving voice to the confusion that the reader must feel when encountering this passage, Father La Frambois exclaims, "the boy is deranged." Power writes, "No, he is *heyo'ka*. He dreams of the thunderbirds,' *I tried to explain*" (244, emphasis mine). "Tried to explain" is telling; this failure of translation may be purposeful, a moment where the act of translation is revealed as such. Each time Power confronts Ghost Horse she risks ejecting readers from the narrative by ultimately confronting them

with the irreducibility of an “alien” concept, but Ghost Horse also emphasizes the incredible amount of work Susan Power has done to bring her readers fully into the text and her recognition of the boundaries of cultural knowledge. It is significant that this particular Dakota term in the novel is always italicized, never normalized, illustrating that there are some concepts simply *not translatable into English*, even through cultural translation or figurative explanation. Readers must live with this reality of the novel, must realize that although the religious education they do receive is significant, some things are withheld. The casual reader can simply move on, since Ghost Horse is a minor character and lack of full understanding does not impede the narrative, which at this point in the novel shifts the onus of translation from Power herself and onto the character Red Dress.

As previously noted, Red Dress haunts this entire text; but toward the end of the novel, Power gives us her story in her voice. “Snakes” is named for Red Dress who as a child was chosen by snakes as they wound about her while she slept in the sun. “Snakes” tells us about her adolescence and her work as a translator for a Christian priest, Father La Frambois. The priest tries repeatedly to convert her people, including Red Dress, renaming her “Esther,” but she consistently refuses his ideology, calling it “bribes” (239). One night she dreams of the prairie covered in white parchment paper, dead everywhere except for grass that struggles to grow in her footsteps, and realizes she must do something to help her people. She decides to travel to Fort Laramie, but before she goes she stops at Angry Butte to pray and is chosen by two sister stones. Although Power is never quite clear whether the stones move by themselves or force Red Dress to leave them where they will be found, the

soldiers who find them are quickly dispatched at night in a quiet war while Red Dress acts as a translator for Father Pyke during the day. Without the religious ideology already imparted to the reader, “Snakes” makes no sense. However, since the reader has already met both Herod and Anna, and has seen what they are capable of, the power of the stones is not surprising.¹¹

This is particularly true in “Snakes” because Red Dress acts as the translator and everything in the chapter is automatically in a Dakota framework, rendering translation into Dakota unnecessary. Rather than translate Dakota religious beliefs for the reader, Red Dress translates Christian and western ideology for her people, recontextualizing Christian symbolism and doctrine to show the reader that *all* meaning is culturally contingent, while also showing the ideological violence of Christianity from a Dakota point of view. “Snakes” embeds readers in a Dakota worldview so completely that it dominates the entire narrative and forces the reader to make sense of the events of the story for him/herself—or rather, resist interpretation, since within Dakota religious beliefs, as the text has shown, the “impossible” is perfectly reasonable and some things are simply outside of language. This is brave of Susan Power, because it allows for the possibility that readers will simply dismiss the events of this chapter as “supernatural” or magical realism. But again, she resists this reading by showing how the Dakota people that Father La Frambois hopes to convert view Christian religious beliefs as strange and how Christian doctrine provides the philosophical foundation for the genocide of Native peoples. Reflecting on the stories the priest has told the people, “Cain slaying Abel, Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac, Joseph delivered into slavery by his jealous

brothers,” Red Dress’ father asks, “Why are his people so determined to kill their relatives?” articulating an uncomfortable truth for the Christian reader (245).

Without cultural or historical context, the ideological content behind these Biblical stories is obvious: the foundations of Christianity are steeped in violence and murder. Because the Dakota people have not been tainted by national narratives which glorify the “progress of civilization,” they see these stories for what they really illustrate about white society. The Dakota people rightly interpret these beliefs as “crazy,” and determine to “pray for” white people, subverting the dominant narrative that *they* are the ones who need salvation (245). While the Dakota people translate Christian doctrine for themselves, Father La Frambois is unable to access Dakota religious beliefs due to his own arrogance. Power writes that Father La Frambois, “had no patience for spirits, dreams, or animal totems, despite his self-proclaimed ability to transform wine into blood and a crisp wafer of bread into living flesh” (240). Suddenly, readers should understand that the religious doctrine they take for granted is equally “foreign” or “fantastic” as the religious beliefs Power has translated for them, and also recognize that the cultural gulf created and maintained by Christian missionaries and ideology causes the multiple deaths in the novel.

“Snakes,” like “Christianity Comes to the Sioux” and other chapters, shows the violence enacted on Native peoples in the name of Christian religious doctrine. Father La Frambois appears banal compared to Reverend Pyke, who uses Christian doctrine to domesticate reality and justify domination. Pyke is terrified of nature, eradicating snakes and bugs at every opportunity, envisioning the world as “a place where animals were bred for food behind neat fences, mountains were leveled,

valleys filled, rivers straightened, and grass trained with a ruler” (256). For him, “there was nothing natural about the natural world” (255). This ideology comes directly from Christianity, Power argues, through Adam’s granted “dominion” over creation. As we are increasingly coming to realize as a nation, this doctrine leads to incredibly destructive policies about nature and resources. For Indigenous people, the idea that God grants Adam control over nature is completely absurd because nature is a force in itself. In Pyke’s vision, the reader should recognize America as it is today with factory farms and domesticated “nature” and connect this with the removal of Indian people.

Red Dress’s dream strengthens this comparison, with its strips of “limp parchment paper, shredded, tattered, a grim harvest” of broken treaties and bleached promises turning the world “dead white” as far as the eye can see (246). This image would be completely bleak and hopeless, except as Red Dress wanders through this bleached plain, “a stunted patch of pale, dry grass” struggles to grow in each footstep (246). For Power, as for her Native readers, Red Dress’s journey symbolizes new growth and the refusal to be buried alive by textual bureaucracy. When she meets her fellow Sioux on the road to Fort Laramie and sees their degraded condition, described as “unsika” (pitiful) and on the verge of starvation, Red Dress realizes the purpose of the dream. She can only bring new growth to her people by becoming a warrior and taking action into her own hands, which she does by becoming the conduit for the stones.

Power’s excoriating critique of dominant society reaches its apex in these red stones, which kill soldiers at Fort Laramie with Red Dress’s help, the first skirmish in

a war that leads to the Fetterman battle and that is reprised at the end of the novel by Red Dress' descendants.¹² Power's "matter-of-fact tone" about these events, writes Vanessa Holford Diana, renders "the spiritual . . . quotidian" (12). There is nothing "supernatural" about how the stones work; what happens is possible within the spiritual ideology espoused by the novel. Red Dress simply places "the stones beneath a clump of weeds, not knowing I will do it," and later appears at the tree where the soldier will hang himself without knowing why she is there and what will happen (Power 267). In other words, the medicine acts *through* Red Dress, and the "killing of each man is a sacred ritual of survival" (Diana 15). It takes Red Dress a while to realize "I am at war," but when she finally does, she embraces this purpose fully, and the reader views her actions as justified because we've seen the horror of the future and the degraded condition of her people (Power 269). "You are another one we won't have to fight," she thinks as yet another soldier winds a noose around his own neck (270).

This makes Red Dress "the heroine of the novel" and her message is arguably also Power's central message to her Native readers: to resist assimilation and "dance a rebellion" (Oslos 2, *The Grass Dancer* 332). Although Red Dress is eventually killed by Reverend Pyke, who subsequently takes his own life because of the stones, she haunts the rest of the novel, including the rest of her own story. In the end of "Snakes," Red Dress watches the lives of her people deteriorate as their horses and homelands are taken from them, as the Ghost Dance movement is brutally suppressed, as their children are kidnapped and shipped across the country to the infamous jail known as Carlisle Indian School. Throughout it all, Red Dress

helps her people resist assimilation by continually reminding them: “*You are Dakota*” (282, emphasis original). Susan Power reminds her Dakota readers of this as well, perpetuating the cultural battle her characters embrace at the end of the novel while simultaneously inducting non-Native readers into a Dakota worldview that reveals the destructive foundations of western society. Cultural translation is one of the ways Power reveals this underlying ideology. In turn, *The Grass Dancer* doesn’t only show *how* cultural translation is possible without violating tribal boundaries about the sacred, it argues this very act is *necessary* to work for justice for Native peoples. When Red Dress reflects on her duties as translator for Father La Frambois, she expresses a regret intended for other Native fiction writers:

I had thought I was shielding Father La Frambois from information
I felt he would never understand, would in fact find disturbing. It
was only as I watched his bent figure diminish to a speck that I
realized my motives were suspect. I had been protecting myself,
refusing to speak aloud the legends and ideas I thought would
sound absurd in bare English. I nurtured secrecy to avoid derision.
(247)

In this passage, Power expresses that Native writers should not withhold religious information from their readers because of fear or shame. Like Red Dress, she wants them to realize that they must use their religious worldviews to engage the very foundations of western ideology if they want to change readers’ perceptions of society and Native America. Otherwise, those “translating” Native cultural values or religious ideology will continue to perpetuate stereotypes, misunderstanding, and

ultimately, genocide. Red Dress never forces Father La Frambois to understand her worldview, and many Native writers allow non-Native readers to maintain their ignorance by withholding information. True, there are very good reasons to be careful about how to include religious ideology in fiction. But Power's novel shows it is possible, and that if successful, it radically alters the way readers understand the text and the world, creating awareness and a foundation for social justice.

By the end of *The Grass Dancer*, Power succeeds in speaking in two languages to two audiences at once while maintaining a subversive message. To her Native or Dakota readers, she fulfills exactly the same role Red Dress does at the end of the novel: "I am a talker now and chatter in my people's ears until I grow weary of my own voice. *I am memory*, I tell them" (282, italics original). In this novel, cultural memory and language are dynamic, living presences. To her non-Native readers, Power dismisses the mistaken belief that Native cultures are slowly dying by teaching them a new way of viewing the world, exactly the same way she does for students in her classroom, as I point out in my epigraph. "I tell them stories and try to place them behind my eyes so they can look out at the world as I do," she writes, and in this way, she teaches them "that everything is potentially alive; in my world everything is capable of spirit" ("The Table"). When written successfully, Native American fiction can radically alter the way mainstream non-Native readers view the world and undermine the ideological foundations of this nation, ultimately making each reader reflect on his or her complicity as a citizen of a country that continues to oppress and dominate Native peoples. But *The Grass Dancer* goes even further. It

seeks to transform readers into allies in order to make the struggle for religious rights and cultural survival more achievable for Indigenous peoples.

Chapter Two:
Commercial Concessions: Religious Impotence in James Welch's *Fools Crow*
and Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues*

As Native American literature became more popular in the last quarter of the twentieth century, the issues surrounding how Native writers shaped (or didn't shape) their work to meet the demands of a growing audience gained critical attention, causing the Native writing community split, as Gerald Vizenor said in an interview, between "commercial writers who are Native and literary artists who are Native" (qtd in Purdy, "The Future" 212). Vizenor implies that while some authors choose to publish with large, mainstream publishers and make concessions to major market forces, others remain true to "art." The release of *House Made of Dawn* through a commercial publisher is a perfect example of the pressures that mainstream Native authors face today: Momaday's novel has been both lauded for the way it incorporates traditional Kiowa beliefs and denigrated for "selling out" because it masterfully employs western modernist literary techniques.

The work of James Welch and Sherman Alexie falls into the "commercial writer" category of Vizenor's formulation. Welch and Alexie have large audiences and have each produced multiple novels, short stories, poems, and films, and although the two writers have vastly different styles, both view the Indian community and religious vitality as part of a vanishing, anachronistic past. David Moore writes in *The Cambridge Companion to Native American Literature* that Welch and Alexie "mark the Indian community more as a painful absence than as a promising presence" (303), which, I argue, influences the way *Fools Crow* (1986) and *Reservation*

Blues (1995) represent religious practices. Although both attempt to undermine preconceived notions of Indianness, neither is immune to ubiquitous stereotypes of Indian people in general and medicine people in particular. Louis Owens's theories on reader expectations of Native American literature elucidate why this might be the case. As he writes in *Mixedblood Messages*, Native American writers "must demonstrate a dexterity with the 'master's tools' while simultaneously bearing and baring sufficient traces of subservient savagery to provide a kind of 'ethnostalgia,' or literary tourism for the white reader" (59). While I do not want to dismiss the powerful messages these novels contain for Native and non-Native peoples alike, they also participate in the "ethnostalgia" and "literary tourism" that attracts non-Native readers, which in this case is particularly dangerous because these authors legitimize and authenticate the stereotypes included in their novels. Admittedly, it is hard to *escape* these stereotypes, as Gerald Vizenor notes in a recent interview:

So far the commercial interests have not varied so widely from early romantic notions about Natives. I mean, of course we've come a long way from the notions of Karl May or James Fennimore Cooper, but the tragic romance, lowercase 'r' romance, that satisfies popular readers—in fact, they expect those metaphors of tragic romantic outcome to be delivered, and if it's not, they're not so sure it's Native . . . because that idea of the tragic victim is so established in American consciousness, that any other outcome is not believable. (qtd in Purdy 214)

The problem with the “tragic victim” rhetoric is that it eclipses, and therefore erases, Native peoples’ current struggle for survival and political rights. Americans see images of Native defeat too often to believe anything else, even if Welch tries valiantly to weave a traditional sense of society, community, and history into his novel, and Alexie attempts to undermine dominant ideology using humor.

Tragic romance is only part of the problem, however. Neither Welch nor Alexie can imagine medicine people and the beliefs they embody existing in or working to create a “traditional future.”¹³ Although both claim to write for Native peoples, it is important to note that their work is marketed and packaged for a non-Native consuming audience. In each novel, the portrayals of medicine people and religious practices pander to mass-market expectations of Native peoples. In *Fools Cron*, Welch creates what some critics describe as a “historical epic,” but he also indulges in imperialist nostalgia (however unintentional) and reproduces the story of the vanishing Noble Savage. Alexie makes quite different commercial concessions in *Reservation Blues*: through humor and pan-Indianism, he erases tribal difference and advocates a confused theology reminiscent of the New Age Spiritual movement, not traditional Spokane practices. Welch and Alexie undermine the medicine people and spiritual beliefs included in their texts. Welch’s narrative argues that medicine people are part of a vanishing culture, ceding to civilization and domination, and Alexie’s shows the results of this domination, which is emptiness and cultural impotence.

The Problem of “History”

In order to understand the problem with the way the sacred and medicine people are represented in *Fools Crow*, it is necessary first to look at the way the book is framed as a historical epic/tragedy. The reader begins the story with White Man's Dog, a Pikuni (Blackfeet) youth who has not received a vision, unlike his popular and handsome friend, Fast Horse. However, as the novel progresses, White Man's Dog becomes an apprentice to a medicine person, Mik-api, and his standing within the tribe elevates, while Fast Horse joins the band of Owl Child, and falls prey to anger, liquor, and rebellion. White Man's Dog becomes Fools Crow, a leader of his people and a medicine person. As the novel progresses and settlers encroach on Pikuni lands, bringing devastation and smallpox, Welch weaves into one seamless story two competing visions of history—a Euroamerican linear narrative with a Native version using traditional stories and ceremonies—so that the reader moves between them and experiences both. Kenneth Lincoln calls Welch an “Indian postmodernist... collating fragments” and says that he “translates the nightmarish reality of a postwar Native Fall and post-holocaustal Wasteland into contemporary Blackfeet truth-telling” (153). While I agree with Lincoln that *Fools Crow* is an ambitious attempt to intercede in the outdated historical narrative genre, readers are not given the tools to help them understand that the stories about creation, Sun Dance, Beaver Medicine, and Nitkosan are more than mere “stories” in the Euroamerican, western philosophical tradition. In addition, the novel ends with the Marias Massacre of January 23rd, 1870 (also known as the Baker Massacre), the reprisal of the United

States army against the raids conducted by Owl Child and his followers, repeating a narrative that American readers know too well.

The fundamental problem with *Fools Crow* is that it plays with an American novelistic form that it does not re-write. In an interview with Laura Coltelli, Welch admitted that he always worked within “the Western, European-American tradition, which differs quite markedly from the storytelling tradition” and the novel shows that influence (186). The cover of *Fools Crow* calls the novel “an epic tragedy of classic proportions” and simultaneously dismisses the (alter)Native historical narrative as a journey into an “Indian World, a world in which reality is idyllic and bitter, hard-edged and magical.” The traditional form of the novel, that of historical epic, is “classical”—in other words, developed, recognizable, *civilized*. The “Indian world” is described in all-too familiar terms, as both pastoral (“idyllic”) and angry (“bitter”), as well as “magical.” “Magical” dismisses the Blackfeet cosmology that Welch painstakingly weaves into the text as nothing other than parlor tricks performed for amusement. Even before medicine people appear, the religious beliefs they exemplify have already been undermined. In fact, Welch admitted that for many readers the Blackfeet historical narrative interwoven in the text can and often *is* dismissed by “rational thinkers” as a form of “surrealism,” which is akin to saying it is “make-believe” (Coltelli 188). Within the novel, Welch’s stylistic choices, including his approximations of Blackfeet verbal patterns into English, his portrayal of traditional Blackfeet lands as empty, open space, depopulated and yearning for settlement, and the sense of doom cultivated throughout the novel reinforce the message that with modernity medicine people were rendered obsolete.

The reader begins the book fully aware of the historical outcome of the novel, and the stereotype of the West as the mythic space of American destiny is reinforced in the first pages as White Man's Dog examines the open prairie and stars. "White Man's Dog raised his eyes to the west and followed the Backbone of the World from south to north until he could pick out Chief Mountain" (Welch 3). The reader sees a huge, empty, open space, depopulated and yearning for settlement—a pictorial of the well-worn "manifest destiny" ideal. Many critics and writers disagree, pointing out that beginning the text this way grounds it in a distinctly Native ideology: the readers start with geographical specificity and its connection to being in everyday reality. This is true, but such assessment comes out of a traditional Native world-view; for non-Native readers this scene reiterates an image seen countless times in cowboy-and-Indian films, echoed in Frederick Turner's famous speech at the Chicago World's Fair, and repeated in the movie *Dances with Wolves* (among countless others). Fools Crow's multiple journeys, where he travels for days without seeing another human being, reiterate the image of the West as an empty space waiting for settlement. As Louis Owens writes, "the monochromatic sky stretches forever . . . as if heaven and earth have merged to form an embryonic sea-space with which the romantic imagination may bring forth the new man, the isolate American" (*MM* 8-9). There is no sense of the teeming bands of people, buffalo, and other animal life that occupied this space, no sense of a civilization *already there*. Just like a traditional 1950s western film, the novel/camera pans a lonely and bereft space, romantically wild, free, and "virginal." Consequently, the reader's perception of The West as located in a timeless dialectic reinscribes the atavistic Indian. "In spite of

centuries of contact and the changed conditions of Native American lives,” notes Robert F. Berkhofer in *The White Man’s Indian*, “Whites picture the ‘real’ Indian as the one before contact” (28). The beginning of *Fools Crow* gives white readers exactly what they expect: a pre-contact, primitive Native society alone in the vast Wild West, an under-utilized space.

Readers also know what this vision invites: settlement. Within the first chapter, White Man’s Dog mentions the encroaching “Napikwans,” or white men, and already we are immersed in the historical narrative of the “disappearance” or erasure of Native peoples by History (read: Fate). Due to when *Fools Crow* takes place, just prior to the Marias Massacre, Welch cannot avoid this narrative or the sense of coming tragedy: throughout the novel white encroachment is mentioned repeatedly with greater and greater frequency, leading to a sense of inevitability. In “The Indian Historical Novel,” Alan Velie writes that historical novels are particularly problematic for Native writers, because “White Americans, whether sympathetic or not to Indian concerns, tend to view Indian history in tragic or ironic terms, thinking primarily in terms of Indian failures or disasters” (293). It is very hard, according to Velie, for a writer to undermine this expectation. Although some critics have objected to Velie’s classification system, arguing it is proscriptive and merely “mark[s] the existing limits of Indian historical fiction, not the limits to which such writers are inherently bound,” his argument about what white readers *expect* from this genre is sound (Donahue 55).¹⁴ The inevitable sense of manifest destiny continually works its way into the narrative, causing *Fools Crow* and the Pikuni to lament their fate. *Fools Crow* thinks, “So many Napikwans, closing in all the time,

made the people feel that their time on the plains was numbered” (Welch 159). The repetition of an era passing, or “hints of these societies’ coming collapse . . . create not moral indignation but an elegiac mode of perception” argues Renato Rosaldo, in his meditation on what he calls “imperialist nostalgia” (68). Writing about ethnography, Rosaldo points out that it displays nostalgia most often when portraying a culture as it was “traditionally,” and it is thus involved with “mourning the passing of what they [colonizers] themselves have transformed” (69). I do not think that Welch himself feels at all nostalgic for the imperialist era—this is clear in the massacre scenes of the novel as well as in the repetition of white people invading Native lands. Indeed, he attempts to circumvent this discourse by giving us history from a distinctly Blackfeet point of view (one of the novel’s greatest ambitions). But Rosaldo’s definition elucidates why non-Native readers continue to adore *Fools Crow*. It allows them to mourn the passing of Native American cultures while simultaneously disavowing any accountability in events long since past and comfortably couched in fiction.

Rather than focus on the historical determinacy of the novel, many Native critics praise the strength of its alternative narrative and how it places readers within a Blackfeet worldview through traditional stories. The Blackfeet stories act as mirrors, guiding the characters’ actions in everyday life, serving as a reference to the past and to the present, as they do in Native oral tradition. In this way, Blanca Chester notes, they disrupt the western view of history by moving away “from (patriarchal) monologue towards narrative,” and, finally, into “dialogue” (99). This “dialogue” between historical narratives is supposed to occur for the reader, who, it

is assumed, notices the Native historical narrative in the text for what it is. Welch attempts to create this dialog by placing a large part of the novel in the world of Feather Woman, who gives Fools Crow the vision of what will become of his people, and also by telling traditional tribal stories that locate important events and ceremonies in Native history and show their continuity to present day. Spliced in with life back in camp, these episodes of Fools Crow in an alternate space with Feather Woman attempt to get the reader to see that these events happen concurrently, and so work to help them experience a Native worldview through reading. This is not, as Louis Owens notes, magical realism, though moments like this are often mislabeled as such. Rather, Welch creates a serious intervention to reshape historical narrative as readers know it (*Other Destinies* 165). However, although I agree that Welch attempts an important and worthy feat, the views these Native critics espouse are deeply influenced by the cultural knowledge they bring to the text of *how to read* dreams/visions, traditional stories, and references to the sacred. Given the rampant misrepresentation of Native peoples in general and of Native spiritual beliefs in particular, non-Native readers lack the knowledge necessary to grasp the importance of these stories as competing versions of historical truth and reality.

To see the influence of cultural knowledge on Native critics, one only has to compare their reviews to those written by critics outside Native communities that trivialize, or fail to see altogether, the parallel structure Welch creates. The *New York Times* review calls the novel a “coming of age” story “in a time and society that are long gone” and argues that the historical plot is *interrupted* by “the more compelling

aspects of the culture—the prayers, ghosts, dreams and waking visions that make up a warrior’s spiritual life” until “the real world blend[s] into the *unreal* until neither we nor the characters themselves can tell the difference” (Wild BR14, emphasis mine). Another reviewer labels *Fools Crow* “surrealism” steeped in “myth” and “magical realism” (Gish 350). Clearly, it is easy to misunderstand the traditional Blackfeet elements in the text, and dismiss them as “unreal,” myth, or fairytale. Non-Native reviewers, like non-Native readers, see this as a work of historical fiction, where the “fictional” elements are the Native elements and the historical elements are those that align with “rational” linear United States history.

Welch also attempts to intercede linguistically in *Fools Crow* by approximating Blackfeet speech patterns in English. Many critics mention the awkward formulations even in their positive reviews, as if they don’t want to call attention to this serious flaw in such an ambitious novel, but the language-play in *Fools Crow* further distances the reader from the plot of the story, exoticizes the characters, and fetishizes Nativeness in localized, verbal forms.¹⁵ In his analysis of the interchangeable terms in the beginning of the novel, “Skunk-Bear” and “wolverine,” David Treuer argues, “This kind of sacrifice—culture and concept laid aside in favor of flow and flavor—occurs throughout the book” (86). He thinks that Welch does this to make his text seem more “authentic,” and asks how readers make sense of something that has been what he calls “Indianized” (107).¹⁶ Welch is unique because he is the only Native author to attempt to consistently translate speech patterns, yet he does so at great cost: by rendering Blackfeet easily readable rather than leaving the words untranslated, Welch removes any barrier to intelligibility the non-Native

reader might experience, and therefore never undermines the western worldview embedded in the text, which is reinforced by structure, style, historical narrative, and literary tradition. Translation, in this case, also works to undermine the (alter)Native historical narrative embedded in the text, because if untranslated, the Blackfeet words would force the reader to see two modes of history and ideology working side by side.

While making the story more palatable, the “translated” Blackfeet terms unfortunately read, as one reviewer put it, “positively and disconcertingly ‘foreign’ . . . like pidgin English,” a linguistic marker of the anachronistic Indian also familiar to the average reader (Vangen 61). Welch admitted in an interview that he didn’t grow up speaking Blackfeet, perhaps contributing to the awkward constructions he creates, although any translation tethered directly to linguistic patterns would sound equally awkward (Opitz 130). What does this style and verbal approximation attempt to convey, and for whom? Since Welch didn’t speak Blackfeet himself, he clearly embedded these “translated” terms into the novel in order to convey a sense of authenticity, a sense of “Indianness” that his readers expect from a Native-authored novel. His choice capitalizes on the “ethnostalgia” Owens notes non-Native readers desire and the “imperialist nostalgia” Rosaldo diagnoses. The problems the speech approximations create extend to the representation of medicine people and ceremonies in the novel, because in using the term “medicine,” the inadequacies of translation become even more apparent.

“Medicine” appears over one hundred and fifty times in the text, in contexts so various that it is difficult to ascertain exactly what it means. It is used in proper

names, such as Two Medicine River and Medicine Line, the border to Canada. It is used to describe ceremonies, with references to the Medicine Pole in Sun Dance and the Beaver Medicine Bundle. There are also medicine men and women, and people can have either good or bad medicine. Welch never gives the reader a framework to understand medicine, although the main character, Fools Crow, becomes a medicine person—or, to add to the confusion, a “many-faces-man,” or, further still, a “heavy-singer-for-the-sick.” The concept of medicine is further complicated by its conflation with the word “magic.” “Magic” is used interchangeably with the term “medicine” eight times in the novel, always in references to healing ceremonies, and undermines the belief in medicine as a force which actually exists in this world as Native people understand it. In the very beginning of the text, for example, White Man’s Dog must try to change his luck because his fast was unsuccessful and he did not receive a vision or a spirit helper. He visits Mik-api, the medicine man, who “perform[s] a ceremony, and . . . has some strong medicine to make [White Man’s Dog] brave” (Welch 8). White Man’s Dog replies, “Surely Mik-api will work his magic on us and make us successful” (8). From one sentence to the next, “medicine” becomes “magic,” changing the readers’ understanding of what Mik-api can do.

The standard definition of “magic” at first seems benign, defined as “the use of ritual activities or observances which are intended to influence the course of events or to manipulate the natural world,” although the word manipulate has negative connotations and “intended” implies desire, not actualization (OED online). However, the definition also includes: “usually involving the use of an occult or

secret body of knowledge; *sorcery, witchcraft*” (OED online, emphasis mine). By using this word, Welch undermines Native spiritual beliefs, relegating them to a sleight-of-hand or a trick performed for amusement, which is only marginally better than equating them with witchcraft or sorcery, a dismissive and damning accusation that has its roots in the Puritan and Christian rhetoric of early colonization. On the more “noble” side of this dualistic concept, “magic” plays into the stereotype of Native healers as mystical ancient fonts of wisdom, repositories of the secrets of nature, and supernatural beings.¹⁷ The portrait of the primary medicine person in Welch’s text, Mik-api, fits these pre-packaged notions of romantic shamans and contradicts them at the same time.

The name Mik-api refers to a traditional Blackfeet story about a warrior who seeks revenge on the Snakes (another tribe) for killing his good friend, Fox Eye, and is visited by a bear who helps him return home after being wounded (Grinnell). Yet the Mik-api of Welch’s text is hardly the triumphant warrior whose name he shares; in *Fools Crow*, Mik-api is lonely, isolated, misunderstood, and, at the end of the book, impotent. As *Fools Crow* unwittingly becomes an apprentice, we see Mik-api through his eyes, depicted as “frail” and “old” (Welch 50-1). The description of Mik-api reflects on the religious practices he embodies and the “disappearance” narrative reiterated by the genre of the novel. In addition, White Man’s Dog notes, “Mik-api lived alone on the edge of camp and received few visitors. . . . Their [medicine peoples’] way seemed like magic to him, and he was fearful to learn too much” (50). The isolation and distance of the medicine man from the tribe implies that medicine people are separated from, and feared by, their own communities.

Later, Mik-api tells White Man's Dog how he became a medicine person, and "White Man's Dog saw a look of pain in the old man's eyes and it surprised him. He had thought that many-faces men were beyond such frailties" (69). The recurrence of the word "frail" encourages the reader to see Mik-api as a pathetic old man, shunned by the tribe, isolated and unwanted. There is no sense at this point in the text that medicine people are a vital part of daily tribal life or respected for their abilities. As we will also see with Big Mom in *Reservation Blues*, Mik-api haunts the periphery, appearing when needed for sage advice or healing and then receding into the shadows, a typical Hollywood shaman.

The image of medicine people as forsaken and misunderstood, yet also capable of wielding incredible power, romanticizes these figures in the same way that the narratological frame of the text and Welch's style romanticize the novel itself. Mik-api's dialog is often simple and written in a plain, understandable prose; however, once in a while he speaks in a wise, enigmatic, stereotypical fashion that reads like a parody of pop culture shamans from films and dime novels. These passages would be darkly comic and reminiscent of Welch's earlier novel, *Winter in the Blood*, but unfortunately they aren't parody. An excellent example is when Mik-api tells White Man's Dog about a dream he received from Raven. Raven tells Mik-api about a "four-legged, smaller than a sticky-mouth but with longer claws and thicker hair than the wood-biter" that has been caught in a trapper's steel-jawed trap (52). Raven would like White Man's Dog to go and release the animal. Mik-api tells White Man's Dog:

"And when I awoke I found this dancing above the fire." Mik-api

handed White Man's Dog a pine cone. It was long and oval-shaped and came to a point at one end. "I believe this came from Raven's house up in the Backbone." White Man's Dog felt the pine cone. It had hairs coming out from under its scales. He had never seen such a pine cone. "How will I find the place?" he said. Mik-api broke into a smile. "I will tell you," he said. (52)

While the pine cone emphasizes the belief in dreams as guides to present and past behavior, to readers it is a "magical" object, appearing from dreams without explanation. It "dances" above the fire and only Mik-api can unravel this riddle by communicating with Raven. As Rayna Green remarks in "The Tribe Called Wannabee," the New Age attraction to Native spirituality is "No doubt . . . connected with several important notions: that Indians inhabit the spirit world (certainly having vanished from this one, sent there by whites), that Indians are wise and skilled in healing, and that a medium directed by a guiding spirit of some order can speak to or instruct others," all of which is clearly present in this scene (40). The prose is not straight-forward, like so many other sections in the book revolving around Blackfeet culture and tradition, and emphasizes the dislocation of medicine people in this text: not only are they removed from their own people, but their *understanding* of the world marks them as different. Animals speak to them and no one else in the text. They, alone, can figure out the enigmas of the universe. Their beliefs and abilities are freakish, not part of a complex belief system shared by others. Rather than center medicine people as integral to the traditional communities they operate within, *Fools Crow* regulates them to the periphery of cultural life. They

cannot heal their people of the wounds or disease inflicted by colonization, and at the end of the novel, they are rendered completely impotent.

There is much critical debate about the ending of this novel: some critics argue that the end declares survival, while others argue that it reiterates the historical tragic “vanishing” narrative. Both readings are present in the ending. As Mik-api performs the Thunder Pipe ceremony and the tribe rejoices, Fools Crow muses, “he knew they would survive, for they were the chosen ones” (390). Survival is reinforced both *within* and *by* the text itself: the presence of Fools Crow’s wife, Red Paint, and their newly born infant son at the ceremony signal futurity for the characters at the end of the novel, a futurity continued by Welch, of Blackfeet descent, writing the book itself. One critic declares, “Welch has written a survival myth for all of us. The ending is not a false optimism or a momentary stopgap but an affirmation of continuance and renewal of resources and energy” (Weidman 93). However, the ending replays the nostalgia of the “vanishing” myth. Prior to the Thunder Pipe ceremony, Fools Crow receives a vision from Feather Woman that details the destruction of the Blackfeet people, culminating in the Marias River Massacre. He attempts to make the survivors of the massacre feel better by remarking, “We must think of our children” (386). Yet this implied futurity is quickly dismissed when Fools Crow realizes, “They had no children” (386). This contradiction is further complicated by the very last passage of the novel, which describes the summer return of the buffalo and implies a resurgence in life, ending with the line, “and, all around, it was as it should be” (391).

But the reader ends the novel knowing the exact *opposite* is true. Not everything is as it should be for these people: the Blackfeet quickly sign a treaty with the United States government that traps them on a reservation, and the slow descent into assimilation and other forms of cultural genocide ensue. For readers not knowledgeable about Native rights and continuing struggle, the ending is dangerously familiar and an affirmation of the status quo, a reiteration of countless movies and history books, a reinscription of the formation of America through tragedy, yes, but also Manifest Destiny. It is almost as if the historical narrative hijacks Welch's intentions—the Marias massacre *did* occur, and so *is* inevitable in the timeline of this book, thus the subsequent ideology that Native erasure was “inevitable” in the course of United States history. James Welch does attempt to intercede on the level of genre and history. Yet to ignore that this novel may not achieve that goal, and may, in fact, support a narrative that many Native critics and political activists actively work to undermine, dismisses the contradictions in the novel to emphasize the admirable *intention*.

Even if *Fools Crow* tells this story through humanized Native characters, it also makes it easy to forget the slaughter of Native peoples on the plains wasn't “inevitable,” enacted by some force of fate, but was deliberate United States policy. Extermination through outright massacre or assimilation only became naturalized and “inevitable” after the fact, laced into a narrative about clashing civilizations that just couldn't coexist, removing agency and responsibility for those atrocities and alleviating national guilt. The fact that *Fools Crow* participates in this narrative is devastating and shows exactly how entrenched in Western literary forms it is,

because even a Native author who wishes otherwise cannot write his way out of it. In the end, *Fools Crow* allows non-Native readers to indulge in imperialist nostalgia and implies that when the frontier vanished, medicine people and indigenous religious efficacy did as well.

Alexie's Undermining Humor

Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues* resembles *Fools Crow* in its depiction of medicine people who conform to romantic stereotypes, but are ultimately ineffectual. In *Reservation Blues*, Big Mom is the embodiment of a culture long past its efficacy, as if she takes up where *Fools Crow* ends. However, unlike Mik-api, she is an emptied-out version of Spokane religious beliefs, a placeholder for *what could be* but no longer *is*. In other words, she is a medicine person without medicine who does not, in the end, offer healing or salvation. This is in part because *Reservation Blues* contains in nascent form the political beliefs Alexie has come to endorse later in his career regarding the inclusion of cultural or religious material. Big Mom's portrayal reflects his conflicted feelings about tribalism and cultural religious vitality, and yet her very presence shows his desire to capitalize on Indianness to market his work. After all, there is no symbol more saturated with assumed Indian cultural signifiers than a medicine person.

Analyzing how this religious figure is framed in *Reservation Blues* is important because Alexie, the most well-known Native writer today, has a large mainstream reading audience. He has written twelve volumes of poetry (mixed with short prose); four novels, including one for young adults called *The Absolutely True Diary of a*

Part-Time Indian (2007) that won the National Book Award; four volumes of short stories, the most recent of which, *War Dances* (2009), won the 2010 PEN/Faulkner Award; two screenplays; and many editorials in newspapers, magazines, and literary journals. When speaking in public, he “performs” his readings, adopting a persona to make his audience laugh, usually at the stereotypes they themselves hold. Since Native-authored fiction is often the only point of contact between non-Native readers and Native America, Sherman Alexie wields enormous power to shape mainstream societies’ conceptions of Native peoples and their cultural vitality in the United States.

Welch and Alexie often traveled in the same literary circles before Welch passed away, and Welch had a very high opinion of Alexie’s work, calling him the “vanguard . . . of young Indian writers” and remarking, “virtually everywhere I go, people, especially young kids, are familiar with his work. I think they feel, here’s a voice that’s unique and fresh” (qtd in Fry 7). Welch was right that Alexie’s work is “unique” among his contemporaries and he works hard to maintain this reputation, proclaiming that, like Welch, he wants to write a different kind of Native American fiction that reflects the current condition of Native people. He aims for a departure from the traditional return-to-home-and-self storylines, which he derisively calls the “corn pollen and eagle feather school” of writing (Bellante 15, Egan 4). In his oeuvre it is easy to see the cultivation of this voice, untethered by tradition, community, and Spokane culture. Alexie’s writing often plays with historical and political representations of Native people in the media, and whether or not his work ultimately reinforces these stereotypes or disrupts them is the subject of vigorous

critical debate. This disagreement is fueled by his style, which deploys humor and exaggeration to destabilize the reader and makes him as “hard to pin down and as full of tricks as the confusing, contradictory, shape shifting Coyote after whom the characters” in Alexie’s *Reservation Blues* “name their rock band” (Richardson 40).

As his remark about the “corn pollen and eagle feather school” of writing shows, Alexie has strong opinions about tribalism and representations of Native religious beliefs in literature. These views are the reason why Big Mom remains the sole medicine person in his work, appearing only in his earliest novel. Unlike Mikapi in *Fools Crow*, Big Mom is not an intentionally tragic figure, although the consequences of her portrayal are indeed tragic. Alexie simultaneously undermines and reinforces stereotypical images of Native religious figures by portraying Big Mom as magical, a healer unable to heal anyone. Instead of being a source of strength and identity in *Reservation Blues*, Big Mom is marginalized in the novel and reduced to pop culture kitsch. The religious views she espouses are ambiguous and denigrated by both the plot of the novel and the characters themselves. In totality, she represents a watered-down version of “Pan-Indian” Native spirituality not unlike the version of “Native” religion offered by the New Age Spiritual movement, an indiscriminate combination of various tribal religious views. And yet, the end of the novel abandons even this generic religious salvation. In Big Mom, Alexie indulges in a different stereotype, equally the product of modern domination: the ineffectual, hopelessly out-of-date healer. She marks the beginning of Alexie’s current political message to young Native teenagers that they must leave the reservation in order to

survive and reveals his discomfort with tying his fiction to culturally specific (Spokane) signifiers.

In *Reservation Blues* Alexie's use of humor and exaggeration complicates reader reception of the novel. Alexie's writing style lulls the reader into a false sense of security through its lyrical beauty before it bruises them with brutal humor by destabilizing the very stereotypes and familiar pop culture images readers may bring to the text. For example, New Age followers attending a Coyote Springs concert hoping to "hear some ancient Indian wisdom [. . .] got a good dose of Sex Pistols covers instead" (41). Alexie's scathing humor is simultaneously one of the strengths of his work and also what makes it hard to find stable ground to stand on. Humor can slice through stereotype and image, and Ronald McFarland argues that because of this Alexie's writing is "polemic" in the very definition of the word, which means "at war." But who, exactly, he is at war *with*? Louis Owens argues that the humor "deflects any 'lesson in morality'" his readers might learn while simultaneously making the degraded condition of his characters more palatable (*MM* 76). While I do admire how Alexie's novels and poetry make readers laugh and urge them to see the absurdity in the stereotypes of Native peoples they have always held while simultaneously absorbing serious messages about colonization and genocide, often his humor reinforces the very stereotypes he works to undermine because he provides no alternative images to replace them.

Alexie's style depends on pop-culture images that draw in the modern reader because they feel included when they "get" the cultural referent, in contrast to Welch, who includes Blackfeet cultural references which might distance his readers.

In fact, Alexie works within American popular culture so consistently that he forgets to include anything traditionally Spokane at all, emphasizing his most consistent message in *Reservation Blues*: Native peoples have had their identities erased, co-opted, and rewritten by the media, leaving young Native people lost between the image of who they think they should be, and who they *actually* are. The latter is never visualized by Alexie's texts, and his characters are uncomfortable in their identities, never come to a sense of themselves as Native people without despair and depression.

Reservation Blues begins when Thomas Builds-the-Fire stops to offer a ride to the blues iconoclast Robert Johnson, who leaves behind his legendary guitar endowed with sinister power by the “gentleman at the crossroads.” The guitar leads Thomas to begin a rock band with Victor Joseph and Junior Polatkin, who are later joined by the Flathead sisters Chess and Checkers Warm Water, and the band becomes Coyote Springs. As Coyote Springs tours and gets into trouble, plagued by liquor and white female hippie roadies, Calvary Records learns of their fame and sends them an invitation to audition for a recording contract. The entire novel takes place on a parody of a reservation—with a “man who was probably Lakota” because every reservation needs at least one Sioux—which in the end is abandoned for city life.

Big Mom literally frames *Reservation Blues*, appearing in the beginning and the end of the text, and also marks the center around which the narrative revolves. From the first page she is an inscrutable mystery, drawing famous blues guitarist Robert Johnson to the reservation by appearing in his dreams and promising him

salvation. As Johnson tells Thomas Builds-the-Fire about his dreams of Big Mom, Thomas replies, “Ain’t nobody goes up the mountain to see her. We always wait for her to come down. Only special visitors get to go up the mountain. Nobody has ever seen one of them. We just hear them late at night, sneaking through town” (8). After this passage, the text shifts to Big Mom as she remembers the horse slaughter of September 8th, 1858, when 800 horses were killed by Colonel George Wright to force the Spokanes to accept a treaty and settle on a reservation. Then there is a page break where the past connects with the present:

In 1992, Big Mom still watched for the return of those slaughtered horses and listened to their songs. With each successive generation, the horses arrived in different forms and with different songs, called themselves Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, Marvin Gaye, and so many other names. Those horses rose from everywhere and turned to Big Mom for rescue, but they all fell back into the earth again. (10)

Between these two points of view, the reader learns a great deal about Big Mom’s relationship with the Spokane tribe. Although Big Mom is 134 years old and appears to be the receptacle of tribal history, no one seeks healing or guidance from her like they would with a traditional medicine person in a traditional tribal community. Thomas implies that the Spokanes wait for Big Mom to come to them, but this only happens twice in the novel to conveniently move the plot along. Instead, mysterious “visitors” creep up her mountain in the middle of the night for unknown purposes and leave again, revealing she is peripheral to the everyday lives of the Spokanes below her, like Mik-api in *Fools Crow*.

Alexie's first chapter posits the horse slaughter as central to the narrative, the reason the Spokanes have reservation blues. Of course, this is true: the slaughter in 1858 forced the Spokanes to capitulate to United States relocation policy and effectively cut off any mode of transportation or mobility they once had. By connecting this event with the present, Alexie ties hopelessness and the act of genocide to the reservation itself, a place of despair, entrapment, and tragedy. He further emphasizes this connection by saying Big Mom "saw the future and the past" in the horse slaughter, an ongoing genocide (both physical and cultural) of the people, a metaphor reinforced by the lives of the reservation inhabitants and by the fact that all of the horses "fell back into the earth again." Throughout the novel, the horses haunt the text, representing multiple forms of loss, screaming to warn the characters of danger, and the tragedy they embody echoes the tragedy of modern reservation life as the characters experience it. Indeed, the pressure the characters feel to assimilate because of the instability of their identities is one of the most powerful and enduring arguments Alexie makes in this novel. As James Cox notes in *Muting White Noise*: "Alexie suggests that popular culture fulfills a colonial function by erasing real Native history and people from the technological landscape" (150). He goes on to note that both Junior and Victor "experience . . . a sense of lack or disorientation when they compare their lives with the stories and images of Indians on television" (170). All of the main characters in the novel struggle with this: Thomas tries to be as traditional as possible even though the rules of traditional behavior, according to Alexie, "have been forgotten by most of the tribe" (Alexie 5); Victor dreams of western movies and fantasizes about becoming a rock guitar god;

Junior dreams of his own voicelessness (113) and tells Victor after his death that when he closed his eyes, he didn't see anything, "No stories, no songs. Nothing" (290). "Nothing"—the emptied-out stereotype without positive alternatives to replace it. In the vast emptiness that marks these characters' lives—a scathing critique of the way popular culture works in the service of continued domination—Big Mom *could* represent the possibility for healing, but Alexie rejects this storyline. His rejection is incredibly poignant and sad, because instead he argues through the pop culture images, scathing humor, and the despair that dominates his characters' lives that cultural tradition and religious practice (of any kind, Native or Christian) cannot help Native people in the modern world. In fact, nothing can. While the novel implies that music offers the possibility of healing, in the end it divides the community against itself. Stories "never healed anything" (6), love is compared to signing a treaty and its devastating effects (31), the community rejects Coyote Springs as soon as they leave the reservation, regardless of the fact that they return (179), and Big Mom's students, in her own words, rarely "ended up happy" (216).

The power that the media has to control images and thereby identity is best embodied in the text by the interactions between Coyote Springs, General Sheridan and Colonel Wright. Through these interactions, Alexie argues that unless Native people represent themselves, write their own lives, create their own music, and produce their own movies, dominant society will continue to do it for them, ultimately producing the exact same outcome the historical Sheridan and Wright attempted to achieve in their campaigns of slaughter on the plains and in the northwest. As Betty and Veronica's success at the end of the novel with their smash

hit “Indian in my Bones” attests, Americans are always willing to replace Native peoples with their own ideas of what being an Indian means, and further, are happy to “become” Native and occupy that identity themselves. But what is Spokane identity in this novel? It is easy to see Blackfeet identity in *Fools Crow* through ceremonies, tribal stories, and even Welch’s awkward approximation of Blackfeet language into English. But *Reservation Blues* argues there is no modern Spokane identity. Alexie does not endorse a return to traditional values and ceremonies as a way to supplant these empty images of Indianness that the media feeds to Native peoples, and, as many critics argue, the images he *does* supply of Indian life on the reservation are equally damaging. Gloria Bird, in her critique of Alexie’s work, remarks that the reader is presented with what she terms “generic Indianness.” “Stereotyping native peoples does not supply a native readership with soluble ways of undermining stereotypes, but becomes a part of the problem, and returns an image of a generic ‘Indian’ back to the original producers of that image” (49). She further asserts that *Reservation Blues* “omits the core of native community” and that there is “no evidence of Spokane culture or traditions, or anything uniquely Spokane” in the book at all (49). The absence of traditional Native elements in *Reservation Blues* further problematizes the characterization of Big Mom in this text, since she becomes an empty placeholder for traditional Native religious values, a “cartoonish character” who lives in “a kind of Never-Never land,” according to Louis Owens (*MM* 78). If there is nothing “traditional” about the Spokane people, what does a medicine person signify?

Alexie labels Big Mom a medicine person precisely to capitalize on mainstream society's fascination with Native spirituality and "Indianness." He once quipped in an interview: "We live in a capitalist society and it's all about competition. In the world of writing, I have an edge because I'm an Indian" (Nygren 153). Big Mom is one of the signifiers of "Indianness" in this novel, the ultimate symbol of a cultural and spiritual tradition beyond the reach of white society and distinctly "other" to mainstream dominant culture values. Alexie purposefully identifies her *as such* when Thomas tells Coyote Springs Big Mom is "powerful medicine," and again, just in case the reader missed it, "The most powerful medicine" (199). Victor responds, "don't tell me she's some medicine woman or something. That's all a bunch of crap. It don't work" (199). While the reader knows that Victor is destructive and denies anything that might help him, unfortunately in this case he speaks the truth. Despite Victor's assertion, Coyote Springs proceeds to her house, the word "faith" echoing in the trees (200). When they meet Big Mom, she conforms to nearly every element of a stereotypical shaman: she is over "six feet tall and had braids that hung down past her knees" with "a grandmother face, lined and crossed with deep wrinkles" and she wears a "full-length beaded buckskin outfit" (202). In other words, she is an anachronistic stereotype, the old, wise, grandmother healer straight out of the 19th century, who, like Mik-api, lives in isolation and frozen in time. True to form, she takes Chess and Checkers into a sweatlodge, the second of two sweatlodge scenes in the novel, and reads their thoughts, reinforcing again the Hollywood stereotypes of the omniscient seer. In fact, there is very little about Big Mom to take seriously—an assertion further entrenched by Alexie's exaggerated

claim that she is responsible for all of American musical history, including jazz and rap, and who refers to her own abilities as “magic” (203).

As in Welch, “magic”¹⁸ has dangerous connotations that Victor immediately seizes and uses against Big Mom. “She thinks she’s a medicine woman. She thinks she’s Yoda and Junior is Luke Skywalker. Use the force, Junior, use the force” (203). But Victor articulates an uncomfortable truth for Alexie’s readers, for he has given them nothing else to use to understand Big Mom or what she might represent. Instead, he compares her to Yoda, to magic, to “medicine” never defined, and finally he says she is “just a bigger part of God” (206). These “definitions” either show Alexie’s lack of knowledge about medicine and how ill-equipped he is to help his readers understand what a medicine person is, or his unwillingness to do so. Describing her as “just a bigger part of God” makes her seem divine, almost super-human, and definitely supernatural. He doesn’t take time to explain her abilities, and when she shakes the ground or reads peoples’ minds, these abilities are either parodies or reinforce the mystical stereotype. Indulging *in* the stereotype, even with humor, makes it more memorable and reinforces it in the minds of readers, as John Mihelich recently proved with his classroom study on *Smoke Signals*.¹⁹

Big Mom is amorphous because she is a fascinating glimpse into Alexie’s early ideologies on what it means to be a Native writer in formation. In the beginning of his career, Alexie marketed himself as an urban Indian, a non-traditional, non-cultural, mainstream fiction writer who used Indian characters in his novels. The lack of tribal specificity has not changed in his later work, although Alexie now claims that he exempts religious elements because he wants to *protect*

them, not because he doesn't *know* what they are, and he has also said that he considers himself far more "conservative in my take on Indian literature" than any of his critics, including Elizabeth Cook-Lynn and Gloria Bird (Purdy 17). In particular, Alexie singles out N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*, saying, "I thought that book was blasphemous as hell to Navajo culture, the way he used ceremonies and such. I have a real problem with that" (10). Very aware of New Age appropriation and the commercial success of his work, he argues, "Our traditions are about being, about taking place in a specific time and a specific geography. But when in a book that goes everywhere to anybody, it's like a traveling road show of Indian spirituality" (17). In these quotes, Alexie implies that the missing religious beliefs amount to a political stance. But Big Mom's character shows this political position developed only after *Reservation Blues*—a convenient explanation for why the medicine person in this novel contains no specific cultural markers whatsoever. Further, in *Reservation Blues* Thomas has a vision of being in a sweatlodge and Alexie describes the way the ceremony is performed, the order of prayer, and how it feels to be inside the lodge when the water hits the rocks. At the same time, Thomas refuses to pray, thinking, "*People are listening to us pray. They have come into the sweatlodge to steal from us. We have to keep our songs private and hidden*" (Alexie 178, italics original). Thomas is right that "people are listening" to him pray, because Alexie has brought them into a "sweatlodge," which is not the "sweathouse" of Spokane tradition, as Gloria Bird notes (49). While recognizing the desire of the New Age Spiritual movement and commercial sector to capitalize on Native spirituality, Alexie simultaneously shows how a sweatlodge works and argues that it needs to be protected from the very

people he exposes it to. The fact that he includes a sweat ceremony in the novel twice—once through Thomas’s dreams and once through Big Mom, Chess, and Checkers—proves that protectionism wasn’t an issue when writing this novel, even if it became one later in his career.

In fact, in other interviews, Alexie asserts that there are no cultural beliefs left, proclaiming “our identity is much less cultural now” (Moore 298). During the promotions for *Smoke Signals*, he retorted, “A lot more (Indians) pretend to be more traditional and connected than they are” (Fielding no pg) and he has asserted that many of his fellow Native artists write not about who they *are* as Indian people, but about “the kind of Indian they wish they were” (Purdy 10). Needless to say, the work of writers like N. Scott Momaday and Simon Ortiz, among many others who have argued for the persistence and importance of cultural and spiritual beliefs, contradict Alexie’s views. Further, these statements—broad assertions about the state of “Native America” today as a singular, unified, and homogenous group—undermine Alexie’s protestations that he is not a “spokesperson” for his tribe or Native people in general. This is the controversy that makes Alexie a polarizing figure, and his anger about how his own community has responded to his work is apparent. In one interview he remarked, “Being a successful Indian writer, and being an Indian, a ‘good Indian’ (in quotes) are often mutually exclusive things, and there’s a lot of pressure” (11). Many critics see this frustration, at his community and at himself, in his novels. Leslie Marmon Silko noted in her review that “there is an ambivalence . . . toward a talent or gift that consumes individuals and calls them away from the community” (585). This ambivalence, marked by a tension between

the individual and the community, between tradition and modernization, burdens *Reservation Blues*. Ironically, for some, this critical tension is the most “traditional” element of the book. Jana Sequoya argues that the “tension along the lines of revitalizing tradition and selective modernization” is the key issue facing all Native tribes today (461). Indeed, this debate ultimately grounds all conversations about Alexie’s work. For example, Louis Owen argues that while simultaneously withholding all culturally Native American markers, Alexie continues to market himself as a Native American author for a wide commercial audience, “having his essentialist cake and eating it too” (MM 80) while Jane Hafen notes that even if that is true, Alexie’s “sharp edge of essentialism and tribal awareness unmasks institutional and historical racism” (78).

In the end, it doesn’t matter if Big Mom is a wise Yoda-like mentor, a partially divine omniscient grandmother, or the witch from the Wizard of Oz appearing in Indian men’s heads declaring “*I’ll get you my pretty . . . and your little dog, too, because you god-damn Indian boys always got some dog following you around*” (Alexie 209, italics original). She doesn’t save Coyote Springs. They go to New York, fail their audition, and come home to a community that rejects them. Junior kills himself and Victor begins the process of killing himself, too. As Wendy Belcher notes, “Indian magic cannot reach into and alter the lies of the Anglo world” (96). Although the chapter titled “Big Mom” begins with a song that promises readers that if they listen “you might hear what you been missing” and that she’ll “always come back for you,” this is again part of the contradiction that surrounds Big Mom that materializes in “nothing,” “vague, decaying fragments incapable of being shored against anyone’s

ruin” (Alexie 196-7, Owens *MM* 78). The trajectory, from fame to infamy, repeated by all of Big Mom’s students, represents her failure as a medicine person and contradicts the comfort the lyrics suggest. In the end, the novel rejects traditional religious healing in favor of urban salvation.

Right before the conclusion of the novel, what is left of Coyote Springs shows up at the tribal feast where Big Mom performs some mathematical “magic” and then collects money from the reluctant community to help Thomas, Chess, and Checkers. As they drive away from the reservation, horses surround the van “galloping down the road in front of them” (Alexie 306). The novel then telescopes out, connecting Thomas, Chess, and Checkers with those left behind in the Longhouse and the Indians outside the Trading Post, creating an imaginary community connected by common heritage. This is a powerful image and one of the goals of Alexie’s oeuvre: to define Indianness and Indian community beyond the boundaries of the reservation and tribal affiliation. Douglas Ford says that throughout his work Alexie consistently “rejects oversimplified heritages and seeks out representations of identity that go beyond an absolute, determined form” (202). Because of this, his work provides hope to urban Indian communities and provides a way to think about identity beyond reservation politics and blood quantum. But it is revealing that, in order to find or be able to envision community, Coyote Springs must leave the reservation.

Coyote Springs casting off their reservations blues is now Alexie’s most strident message: young people must leave reservations to save themselves. Coyote Springs leaves for the city of Spokane, ready to join dominant society, privileging

individual (or small group) survival over tribal community vitality. Janine Richardson suggests that in this ending, “Alexie—through Thomas and his peers—offers a new plot for American Indian literature,” not one of failure, but of beginning that “declares that now is the time to slip the bonds of the nineteenth century, push beyond mourning, and move life forward towards celebration. But first, history must be laid to rest” (42). It is tempting to read the end of *Reservation Blues* this way, particularly after Alexie’s portrayal of the reservation as such a terrible place, but it is important to remember not *all* reservations are like the one he posits here. Of course the goal is to move beyond the effects of colonization and the conditions brutally enforced by United States policy, as well as the way dominant society continues to define and portray Indian people, but leaving the community is not the way to accomplish this. If all young people left their reservations and did not return, except in “dreams” as Coyote Springs does, tribal sovereignty—even the weak and embattled form it maintains today—would be destroyed. In other words, there is strength in Alexie’s novel, and hope for future generations, but how to fulfill that hope is not fully envisioned and lacks any traditional center, any sense of community or cultural values.

Cultural Impotence

Although Alexie’s political stance is more obvious than Welch’s, the same question arises when considering both, which is what responsibility (if any) do these writers have to their communities and what is the appropriate way to represent religious beliefs to a large consuming audience? For both Welch and Alexie,

medicine people are tied to a fading past and lost cultural traditions, and while Welch is nostalgic about this past, Alexie is not. In his work there is “no regressive nostalgia as a cultural slide” Kenneth Lincoln writes, because there is no fondness for lost cultural ways or the possibility of returning to them (279). They are “gone”: a word that echoes “all over the reservation” (Alexie 96). Like Welch, I do not want to imply that Alexie’s work is not positive in other ways, but his portrayal of medicine people and religious beliefs in *Reservation Blues* is damaging because it implies that tribal specificity no longer matters and that Indigenous medicine, as such, no longer works or offers salvation to tribal peoples.

In the end, a critical issue for both of these writers is their publishing through large, commercial, mainstream publishers, marketing themselves specifically to a predominantly dominant-society reading audience. Because the issue of “who reads” intersects with “who steals” spiritual practices and who makes legal policy, these writers could work to enlighten readers and change their views of Native religious beliefs. Instead, the representation of medicine people in *Fools Crow* and *Reservation Blues* fuels the romantic stereotypes the non-Native readership is already invested in, showing that the stereotype continues to have power and that these writers themselves may have fallen victim to it. The danger in these novels is not only that they cash in on a stereotype, however; they also work in the service of dominant ideology to undermine the efficacy of Native cultures and further distance any Native readers from traditional cultural practices, heightening the sense of shame they have always been made to feel about their religious worldviews. Both novels use medicine people to embody cultural impotence and argue “magic” (or medicine)

will not save anyone, not the characters in the novels, not the writers themselves, and certainly not their own people.

Chapter Three:
Dealing With Dangerous Consequences in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*
and Louise Erdrich's "Love Medicine"

In the mid 1910s, Harvard-educated anthropologist Elsie Clews Parsons made a trip to the southwestern United States to study the religious beliefs of Indigenous peoples. Inspired by her work with Franz Boas, Parsons wrote articles on the Zuni, Hopi, and Laguna for the American Museum of Natural History and returned to the area many times to meet with her informants.²⁰ In her new memoir *The Turquoise Ledge*, Leslie Marmon Silko comments on Parsons' "Notes on Ceremonialism at Laguna" published in 1919, writing that within it "Parsons noted that all of the Laguna people who worked as informants for her the two previous summers had died—two by influenza, and one by lightning strike, but that no one at Laguna had linked the deaths to their work with her" (51). Silko adds, "Parsons fooled herself if she believed this; such links would have been made at once because it was well known that anyone who dared to reveal ceremonial secrets risked severe reprisals from the supernatural world" (51).

As I note in my introduction, the notion that betraying sacred information invites dangerous—and often fatal—consequences is a widely shared belief among Native peoples, and yet there is no consensus about what exactly constitutes "betrayal" or "misuse." The Native American artistic community is self-policing on this issue and often debates the limits of tribal responsibility and the ethical treatment of sacred material; the two sides of this issue—religious purity or adaptation—demarcate the battleground over how to respond to the pressures of

assimilation. At stake is nothing less than cultural survival as tribes work to create a traditional future where ceremonial practices continue to remain relevant in the modern world. This delicate, and at times vicious, fight about how to maintain religious vitality while simultaneously encouraging cultural growth deeply divides Indigenous communities across the nation.

In this chapter, using *Ceremony* (1977) by Leslie Marmon Silko and “Love Medicine” (1984) by Louise Erdrich, I will show that these authors take oppositional sides in this debate. Silko’s and Erdrich’s differing views on sacred material arises out of tribal affiliation, geographical location, and identity politics; ultimately, struggling with their own identities as mixed-blood people, they arrive at very different opinions on how assimilation relates to sacred practice. Initially, Silko and Erdrich seem to have quite a bit in common: they are both commercially successful and widely read Native authors, within the academy and by casual readers. They are of mixed ancestry and have struggled with identity in their lives and within their novels. Both set their novels in the twentieth century and show the daily-lived realities of Native peoples, all of whom are, to a lesser or greater extent, living assimilated lives as Americans as well as tribal lives as Indigenous people. Their writings capture the continuing vitality of tribal religious beliefs despite centuries of colonialism. Yet, for all they have in common, Silko and Erdrich disagree deeply about whether or not religion is yet another aspect of Indigenous culture that can (or already has) become syncretic, even while they agree on the consequences faced by those who misuse sacred material. In *Ceremony*, Silko asserts that old healing practices are impotent and ceremonies must be adapted if they are to heal the

wounds inflicted by the modern era. In “Love Medicine,” a sharp retort to Silko’s postulation, Erdrich contends that ceremonies cannot be changed without disastrous consequences—the very same consequences that Silko acknowledges above when writing about Elsie Clews Parsons and that many argue Silko herself faced when incorporating sacred clan stories into *Ceremony*. Erdrich’s story is a warning to those who believe they can invent their own ceremonies, which is what many critics and scholars argue Silko also did in writing a textual ceremony that she then titled as such. Through the oppositional stances these two women take on Native religious practice in the 20th-century, the divisive conflict raging throughout Indian country surrounding ceremonial practices is laid bare, revealing the spectrum of opinions on the matter as well as how individual tribal spiritual beliefs influence the debate.

Adaptive and Syncretic Religion

Ceremony revolves around Tayo, a mixed-blood Laguna man who has recently returned from the Second World War very ill. Tayo’s illness could easily be labeled Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, his symptoms arising from his experiences in the Pacific during the second World War, including the death of his cousin and his imprisonment by Japanese soldiers. But the novel implies that Tayo’s illness is far more complicated than reliving the trauma caused by the war. It is also fueled by the loss of his mother at a young age, by the way Auntie treats him, by the denigration of his cultural religious beliefs by the boarding school he attends and by his own cousin, who has embraced assimilation more fully than he has. It is produced by the death of his uncle Josiah, who comes to him in a vision in the South Pacific and who is the

only person Tayo could depend upon for solace and guidance. It is also a manifestation of the horror caused by the military industrial complex and its brutal violation of the earth and his people.²¹ Lastly, Tayo's illness is partly his own fault, since he causes the drought suffered by his people when he vehemently prays for the rain to end, an act of disrespect that he must atone for.²² When the reader first meets Tayo, he has just been released from the Veterans' hospital and returns home disabled by illness as his body attempts to purge itself by sweating, vomiting, and shaking. He is a man in need of help, and his grandmother suggests that he consult a medicine man.

In *Ceremony* Silko sets up her theory about how Indigenous religion should respond to assimilation by showing the reader two very different medicine men: Ku'oosh, who represents the ways of the kiva, and Betonie, who is mixed-blood and uses contemporary materials in his medicine. Ku'oosh appears early in *Ceremony* and he signifies old ways of being and old belief systems; he is firmly rooted in Laguna tradition, but Silko portrays him in a such a way that, even as she shows he has an incredible depth of knowledge, this very knowledge is as antiquated as his person. He is so embedded in old traditional practices that those who have been sent to boarding school and have assimilated doubt his efficacy. Silko uses Tayo's Auntie to illustrate the psychological violence perpetrated by boarding school and the rift it caused between traditional practice and assimilation, a violence Auntie then replicates by sending her own son and Tayo away for education. Because she has become Christian and abandoned traditional practices, Auntie protests when Ku'oosh is called to the house, remarking, "Someone will say it's not right. They'll

say, ‘Don’t do it. [Tayo’s] not full blood anyway’” (Silko, 33). Although she is partly worried about gossip and what people will say about her family, she also articulates the belief that medicine might not work on this new generation of mixed-blood people, a belief that many voiced (and continue to voice) after assimilation forced them to internalize Christian (Auntie) or western scientific (Rocky) views. Auntie calls Ku’oosh’s medicine bundle a “bag of weed and dust,” clearly showing her disdain (34). Her son, Rocky, also mistrusts traditional religious practices, calling them “superstitious,” mirroring his mother’s distrust and shame (51). Auntie and Rocky are examples of those who have more “mixed” feelings about traditional practices, far more so than Silko’s mixed-blood protagonist, Tayo.²³ Using Auntie and Rocky, Silko shows how the violent wrenching apart of generations caused by boarding school also created a rupture in religious continuity. While Ku’oosh’s position is one of religious “purity,” this is also what ironically causes some to doubt the use of his power in the modern era, and tragically Auntie’s beliefs about him—as influenced as they are by assimilation, racism, and rumor—are right: he is not able to heal Tayo.

This failure to cure Tayo, the novel contends, occurs because Ku’oosh cannot imagine what the soldiers returning from the Second World War have been through—he is ignorant of the horrors of the modern world and thus the wounds they inflict. Silko writes,

. . . the old man would not have believed white warfare—killing across great distances without knowing who or how many had died. It was all too alien to comprehend, the mortars and big guns;

and even if he could have taken the old man to see the target areas,
 even if he could have led him through the fallen jungle trees and
 muddy craters of torn earth to show him the dead, the old man
 would not have believed anything so monstrous. (36-7)

Tayo belongs to a world Ku'oosh knows nothing about, a world where new technologies for killing have embraced "progress" by increasing lethality, and where illness is no longer merely personal or even tribal. Tayo's illness is multifaceted and as foreign to Ku'oosh as the new methods of war. Ku'oosh's inability to heal Tayo, then, is a failure of the imagination, a lack of *vision*. If he cannot imagine the terror and pain of his patients, how can he fully heal them? He remarks, "there are some things we can't cure like we used to . . . not since the white people came" (38). With this statement, Silko suggests that the old ways of practicing medicine, or the belief that one can go to the spirits for help through praying, fasting, and sacrifice and get answers—in other words, that one can seek a vision—have been permanently disrupted by colonization. The wound is too deep, too historically entrenched and collective for the old ways to work. Through Ku'oosh, Silko claims that traditional beliefs and practices no longer have power, which creates space for the new belief system embodied by Betonie, a belief system that has evolved to meet the demands of the modern age, that emphasizes textual knowledge, and is, at its core, syncretic.

Betonie, according to James Ruppert, is the "ideal person" to help Tayo "mediate" his two worlds because he embodies a combination of the old and the new (83).²⁴ He lives in a hogan, wears his hair in a traditional form, and knows old ceremonies and stories. Betonie tells Tayo that he lives where his family has always

lived, that his home isn't as strange as it may seem because "... this hogan was here first. . . . It is that town down there which is out of place. Not this old medicine man" (118). He expresses a "belonging with the land, and the peace of being in these hills," tracing his ancestors back to where he resides (117). In this way, Silko firmly roots him in a tradition that is geographically specific and has endured since long before the Spanish or white people came.

At the same time, however, Betonie undermines all expectations of what a medicine man should do or what he should be like. Firmly rooted in place, the text suggests that Betonie's practice has been changed precisely because *the place itself has changed*, and thus the people, and their needs, along with it. His hogan is situated above Gallup, a town renowned for the way it exploits Indianness to lure the tourist trade. Located on Route 66, Gallup has always been a vortex of despair for Indian people, a place where one loses one's identity to the tourist trade, where working as a manual laborer or a curiosity is not uncommon, where culture is for sale and ceremonies are for entertainment. It is also a multicultural town, where white cowboys, financiers, and tourists, as well as Mexican performers and laborers, and Native dancers, artisans, and workers, come together. In *Ceremony*, Gallup is the center of a different kind of web than the one of healing Silko creates in the novel, a web of modern commercialization. It is no mistake, then, that Betonie's hogan "looked down on all of it" (116). These words suggest a literal as well as a figurative interpretation: Betonie looks down on Gallup, disapproves of life in this small city and the modern vices it brings along with it. At the same time, there is no better place for a mixed-blood syncretic medicine man. He knows the city as well as he

knows the land, and he knows precisely how Indigenous people suffer within it. He remarks to Tayo, “People ask me why I live here. . . . I tell them I want to keep track of the people” (117). He shows Tayo the “Ceremonial grounds and rodeo chutes” in the east of the city, the “alleys between the bars” where drunks go to sleep off too much liquor, the “north side of the railroad tracks” where the Indians live “next to the river,” which runs near the city dump where “none of *them* want to live” (117, emphasis mine). Betonie knows this geographical and human landscape intimately, and he knows how it uses Indigenous people as fodder for entertainment or as labor. He understands the way the modern world operates and the wounds it can inflict, because he can *see* all of it from where he lives. His vision is wide and ranging. He is a medicine man operating on the front lines of the battle over Indigenous identity and survival.

Keeping track of the modern world isn’t just about the town below him, however. Like Auntie and Rocky, Betonie has been boarding-school educated. He has traveled and brought home texts from his travels: calendars, phone books, boxes of paper, roots and weeds, and Woolworth bags (119-120). Silko writes that Tayo “wanted to dismiss all of it as an old man’s rubbish, debris that has fallen out of the years, but the boxes and trunks, the bundles and stacks were plainly part of the pattern: they followed the concentric shadows of the room” (120). Betonie’s hogan is a syncretic vision of ordered chaos. This amalgamation of the old and the new isn’t limited to space or place, however—Silko goes on to link it directly with his healing practices by placing Betonie’s medicine bundles and layers of calendars side-

by-side, as if there is no difference between the two and the potential powers they contain. Tayo observes,

Hard shrunken skin pouches and black leather purses trimmed with hammered silver buttons were things he could understand. They were a medicine man's paraphernalia, laid beside the painted gourd rattles and deer-hoof clackers of the ceremony. But with this old man it did not end there; under the medicine bags and bundles . . . he saw layers of old calendars, the sequences of years confused and lost. . . . (120)

Betonie is not a stereotypical shaman, and Silko does not make him an easy figure to assimilate into any pre-conceived idea of Indianness or Native religions. She even anticipates her Native readers' alarm by having him address this very concern:

“There are stories about me. . . . They say I'm crazy. Sometimes they say worse things” (123). Even Tayo thinks, “He didn't act like a medicine man at all” (118).

Silko is doing far more with Betonie in this passage than challenging a pre-conceived notion of mystical shamans. She is articulating a radical revision of the idea of what medicine is, and what medicine people use (or should use) as sources of knowledge in their healing, particularly emphasizing the *textual*. Suggesting that potential sources for healing can be found in books and calendars, in phone books and store catalogs, in commercial material published by the white, Euroamerican world (perhaps like *Ceremony* itself), is a dangerous suggestion to make, one that concedes to assimilationist pressures and argues that medicine people no longer operate strictly within Indigenous religious theology. Even Silko remarked in an

interview with Per Seyersted that Betonie is a “questionable character, questionable in terms of the purity of his ritual,” acknowledging that in his portrayal she challenges the efficacy of old religious practices (34). Shamoan Zamir argues that the clutter in Betonie’s hogan “is the embodiment of a process of cultural transformation and innovation that sustains creative survival” and that this is Silko’s way of denigrating “a new kind of fundamentalism born out of a fear that paralyzes creative response,” but even he goes on to note that Betonie’s departures from traditional practice are “much more radical than those that occur during a process of change within a traditional environment” (396, 398). And yet, although Silko acknowledges his religious purity is “questionable” in the novel, she uses Betonie to argue religious syncretism is necessary for survival. Betonie says, “In the old days it was simple. A medicine person could get by without these things. But nowadays . . .” (121). Later, he acknowledges the consequences inherent in changing the form of ceremonies and the fact that some people fear him because of this, telling Tayo that if he wants to leave, he should do so. “Most of the Navajos feel the same way about me,” he says, returning to this idea later by telling Tayo, “I couldn’t help anyone who was afraid of me” (118, 123). Noting the fear of him—which is really the fear of transgressing tribal taboos or about risking punishment for disrespect—Betonie claims a position within the debate over religious practice that is decidedly modern and progressive.

The mixing of ceremonial items in Betonie’s hogan with calendars from the Euroamerican world is also important because it disrupts traditional views through conflating ceremonial time, which is “cyclic” and “accretive,” with chronological

time, which is “linear, incremental, and teleological” (Rainwater “Reading” 14, 12). This is critical because Tayo’s healing begins when he recognizes a calendar page, the encapsulation of a moment of linear time; in other words, his healing begins with a textual recognition that echoes throughout the novel from the calendar to the ceremonial sand painting Betonie leads Tayo through, to the star map Betonie draws for Tayo, to the antelope on the rock Tayo “reads” with Ts’eh, and finally, some argue, to the novel itself as a textual healing ceremony, an argument I will address later. The conflation of texts with ceremonial healing occurs again when Tayo begins to talk about the war, his time in the hospital, the death of Rocky and Josiah, and the illness he suffers. Betonie, in turn, reaches into a box to consult a notebook, telling Tayo “his sickness was only part of something larger, and his cure would be found only in something great and inclusive of everything” (126).²⁵ Yet, Silko’s utilization of these texts is delicate and they are never privileged over Indigenous knowledge. Rather, they become conflated with Native texts, which simultaneously ground Tayo’s healing process in Laguna worldviews and in Euroamerican epistemologies. That being said, written, and not oral, texts do spark the beginning of the Navajo ceremony to heal Tayo, as if the notebook Betonie references has re-written or recorded tribal religious practices, symbolizing a new origin for these beliefs. In the end, Betonie’s use of these texts is the reason why he is successful and Ku’oosh is not: Betonie’s knowledge has scope and crosses culture boundaries, and his syncretic medicine therefore addresses the many sources which contribute to Tayo’s illness, not just the “traditional” ones.

In this novel, Betonie is more than a mere illustration of syncretism. He becomes the voice for Silko's views about the necessity of syncretism for Indigenous cultural and religious survival, saying,

At one time, the ceremonies as they had been performed were enough for the way the world was then. But after the white people came, elements in this world began to shift; and it became necessary to create new ceremonies. I have made changes in the rituals. The people mistrust this greatly, but only this growth keeps the ceremonies strong . . . things which don't shift and grow are dead things. [. . .] But it has always been necessary, and more than ever now, it is. Otherwise we won't make it. We won't survive. (126)

In these words, Silko's opinions about the role and efficacy of healing ceremonies within the modern world are clearly articulated. She endorses a "return to essence" rather than the "precise form" of ceremonies, according to A. LaVonne Ruoff, but I think Silko's position is much more extreme (15). When Betonie says "I have made changes in the rituals" and "it became necessary to create new ceremonies," Silko implies that ceremonies can be created by anyone, entirely disregarding the fact that they are *given*.²⁶ In effect, Silko, through Betonie, advocates "the self-conscious creation of a new culture using selected cultural elements symbolically" (Cutchins 82). In *Ceremony*, traditional religious rituals are "dead things" and in order to "progress, Indians, and indeed all people, must be transformative in their worldviews" (Rice 116). Here, progress, not tradition, is linked to life and creative

evolution, and cultural salvation is impeded by traditional ceremonial practice. This is why Tayo's healing is as multivalent and complex as Betonie's hogan and ideas of syncretism. It begins when Betonie sets in motion a ceremony that encompasses all of Tayo's actions and continues until the end of the novel, a ceremony as complex and dependent on adaptation as Betonie's beliefs.

The idea Betonie expresses in the passage above—that adaptation is *traditional* and leads to growth—reflects Silko's own opinion, yet ironically is also what situates her novel in a traditional Laguna context. As A. LaVonne Ruoff notes in her article on the short fiction of Silko, the Laguna people have a long tradition of adaptation and incorporation of foreign elements and ideology. Laguna reservation has always been a site of mixing, a meeting place of peoples from different races and cultures (Ruoff 2). The Spanish first entered the area in 1540, and after the Pueblo Revolt in 1680, the Laguna reservation became a refuge for other persecuted tribes from the Colorado River basin. Some of these tribes' ceremonial ways influenced the religious practices of the Laguna, as Elsie Clews Parsons noted. Parsons also observed that the continual mixing of people and worldviews at Laguna made them one of the first tribes to accept "intermarriage" (Parsons qtd in Ruoff 3). Silko agrees with, and is the product of, this belief in syncretism, because her grandfather Robert Marmon was one of the first white men to settle on the reservation and become part of a faction that encouraged "Americanization" (Ruoff 3).²⁷ As Silko often comments on in her writing, her family embraced what they viewed as the more positive aspects of American culture; her mother and aunts were boarding-school educated and the entire family prized both books and storytelling as powerful

disseminators of knowledge.²⁸ I do not mean to imply, however, that Silko embraces full assimilation even if she endorses cultural syncretism. Indeed, she uses both Rocky and Auntie in the narrative to show how assimilation alienates Native peoples from tribal traditions. Rather, I suggest that Silko positions religious syncretism as an extension of pre-existing traditional values that emphasized adaptation and incorporation, values that, many believe, have made Native peoples' survival possible. *Ceremony* itself illustrates this belief in adaptation by including traditional stories used in new ways.

From that point of view, the novel is a syncretic masterpiece that defies genre definitions, breaks binaries, and combines oral and written literary forms. It also presents oral stories and sacred clan stories in new ways, as well as in new forms, a controversial and potentially dangerous decision criticized as a breach of tribal taboo regarding sacred matter. Paula Gunn Allen, also mixed-blood Laguna, was the first writer to voice her concerns over Silko's use of these stories, stating, "using the tradition while contravening is to do violence to it" (379). She goes on to note that teaching *Ceremony* is difficult for her because it "run[s] afoul of native ethics" and requires her to "put [her]self and others at risk" (380). Clearly, Allen would agree with Silko's assessment of what happened to Elsie Clews Parsons' informants. Allen goes on to state that it was always clear to her that sacred stories must not be shared, "*lest tragic consequences ensue*" (380, italics original). However, Silko and Allen disagree over whether or not the stories included in *Ceremony* are sacred.

Herein lies the very heart of the issue: what constitutes misuse and violation of sacred religious material? Silko responded to this question—and, by proxy, to

Allen's accusation—in an interview with Ellen Arnold in 1998. Returning to the idea of cultural evolution she said that the “secrecy” Allen endorses is “not the original Pueblo way. That's reactionary, protective, and that's a kind of shrinking away or diminishment of the spirit. . . . I feel confident that I've never divulged anything that was kept secret” (16). For Silko, secrecy shuts down the possibility for cultural evolution and creativity; it is religious fundamentalism. *Ceremony*, for all of its considerable critical acclaim, divides Indigenous communities along lines dictated by religious beliefs. I have talked to Native scholars who, like Allen, refuse to teach the novel and view it as a violation of tribal taboos, and others who see it as a Native literary masterpiece that “re-appropriates,” according to Robert Nelson, stories previously plundered by anthropologists and ethnologists (49). Silko's use of sacred clan stories in the novel has also had other repercussions, which as I have mentioned earlier, include the argument that the novel itself is a textual ceremony.²⁹ If this is true and was her intent in writing, then Silko is a medicine person and believes she can use sacred tribal matter any way she wishes, constituting a breach not only of tribal secrecy, but also, like Parsons' informants, inviting “severe reprisals from the supernatural world” (*Turquoise Ledge* 51). In addition, if the novel is indeed a ceremony, Silko compounded her betrayal by publishing it for commercial sale and inviting an enormous reading audience—largely ignorant of what they could be getting into—to share in the performance of this ceremony, and to share, by extension, the risk she takes by manipulating sacred material.

Carol Mitchell was one of the first scholars to argue *Ceremony* is a ceremony, writing that “the novel itself can and should be viewed as part of the changing

rituals” voiced by Betonie “in which the novelist has become the healer or the shaman and the readers are the participants in the new ceremony” (27). Since putting forth this theory, other scholars of Native American literature have agreed, including James Ruppert, Elaine Jahner, Kenneth Lincoln, and Louis Owens, who commented that “the novel is a multivalent ceremony” written to “cure” and the “implications are serious, not to be taken lightly” (*Other Destinies* 171, 172).³⁰ These theories have, in turn, led more recent scholars, most notably Brewster Fitz in *Silko: Writing Storyteller and Medicine Woman*, to declare that Silko is a medicine woman.³¹ But this is a naïve understanding of Native religious ideologies and what a ceremony actually *is*. These scholars completely ignore the problematic issue of what happens when sacred material is transformed into text, and how (or does) that change its efficacy? The fact that ceremonies are designed to be *spoken* is an issue that can’t be summarily dismissed, for it is the act of prayer expelled with breath that makes a ceremony a ceremony. Kenneth Lincoln writes, “to name things rightly is to make medicine through memory. . . . Thus right naming connects inner with outer forms, the *ianyi* (‘breath’) or spirit with matter by way of living words” (*Speak* 242, italics original). It is the expression of the words, carried on the breath (*sign* of life itself), delivered in a certain pattern with a particular rhythm and conducted by someone trained in how to handle the spirits that makes a ceremony efficacious.

I cannot answer whether or not reading *Ceremony* aloud would make it a ceremony, but I do think that seeing a work of fiction as a religious ritual reveals a desire to be a part of some kind of authentic Indigenous healing that makes the book very attractive to a particular segment of its reading population. As Paula Gunn

Allen notes, when teaching Native American literature students are always “voraciously interested in the exotic aspects of Indian ways—and they usually mean by that traditional spiritual practices [. . .] sacred language, rituals, and spiritual customs” (382). Critical readers and scholars are not immune to this desire either. As David Treuer observes, the fact that the sacred stories included in the text look like ceremonial chants is “to mistake how the book looks for what it does” (148). Further, although there may be evidence that supports reading the novel as a ceremony, there is also significant evidence to suggest that when Silko called the novel a “ceremony” in her 1977 interview with Dexter Fisher, she meant it in a metaphorical sense. After all, before the interview was published, she had no control over formatting the text itself, and in the preface for the 2006 edition of *Ceremony*, Silko very carefully puts “ceremony” in quotations, calling the reading of the novel as a religious ritual into question. She writes, “the title of the novel, *Ceremony*, refers to the healing ceremonies” and goes on to remark that she was very happy when “the novel and ‘the ceremony’ were finished” (xv, xvii, emphasis mine). In her discussion of the novel in *Dreams of Fiery Stars*, Catherine Rainwater also puts “ceremony” in quotes, calling the novel a “‘ceremony’ of reclamation” (37) and even Louis Owens calls it a “‘cure,’” as if he is unsure what that word means or exactly *what* the novel cures (*Other Destinies* 171-2). While there is no doubt that *Ceremony* has done a great deal to create cross-cultural understanding and sympathy, all of these Indigenous writers, using scare quotes, call into question the theory that the novel is a healing ritual itself. They are all aware of the cultural implications of such a label, of the dangers of misusing or revealing sacred information for wider dissemination,

particularly when that dissemination itself cannot be controlled. In the preface to the 2006 edition, Silko clearly eschews the idea that the novel is a ceremony and that she is a medicine woman, lest she invite tragic consequences (as both Paula Gunn Allen and she write) for herself and her readers. However, she did choose to disregard any warnings or reprisals she might have faced when including sacred clan stories within the novel, and through Betonie, she endorses religious cultural syncretism as the only way to heal the wounds inflicted on Tayo. Her views illustrate one side of the debate about how to maintain religious vitality, and *Ceremony* clearly argues in favor of cultural adaptation in religious practice.

The Dangers of Transgression

Louise Erdrich's first novel is just as syncretic in form as Silko's; indeed, some would argue it is more so. *Love Medicine* was praised at the time of its publication for its poetic aesthetic and easy readability for those outside of Native cultural knowledge. While many note that *Ceremony* is a novel that forces readers to make connections and bridge disjunctions, *Love Medicine* is praised for making a syncretic cultural frame pleasurable and easy to navigate. However, *Love Medicine* does not take a syncretic view of ceremony or medicinal practices themselves, arguing instead in the novel as a whole that Indigenous religion can be synchronic with Christianity, but not syncretic. As Catherine Rainwater points out, in the novel "encoded biblical material is juxtaposed with encoded data from the American Indian shamanic tradition. These religions are epistemologically, experientially, and teleologically different" and so, she reasons, the novel never resides in one religious

certainty (“Reading” 407). However, in the chapter after which the novel is titled, Erdrich illustrates the danger in believing that religion can or should be syncretic and shows why *Ceremony* is religiously divisive.³² Participating in the process of cultural reconstruction and renewal in a distinctly Anishinaabe way, Erdrich weaves together comedy and tragedy to rewrite a trickster tale for the 20th-century that, while illustrating cultural syncretism in other ways, reinforces traditional values regarding the sanctity and preservation of religious practice.

In “Love Medicine,” Lipsha’s grandfather, Nector Kashpaw, has Alzheimer’s and has regressed to an earlier time in his life marked by a prolonged love affair with Lulu Lamartine. As Nector begins to chase after Lulu once again, Lipsha cannot bear to see his grandmother in pain, so he agrees to concoct a love medicine to ensure the end of their lives are spent peacefully together. The story from beginning to end is an explanation of how medicine works, sets forth an ethics of practice, and illustrates what happens when proper rules of conduct are disregarded. As Lawrence Gross notes in his work on Anishinaabe religious views, “humans need the aid of ‘other-than-human-beings’” but this aid “does not come free and is dependent upon certain principles of human behavior,” principles which Lipsha continually violates throughout the course of “Love Medicine” (“Trickster” 443). However, in order for Erdrich’s readers to fully understand why the end of the story is preordained throughout, she first has to teach readers what medicine is and why it should be respected.

Erdrich introduces these concepts with Lipsha’s explanation that he has “the touch. It’s a thing you got to be born with” (Erdrich 230-1). He continues, teaching

the reader that having medicine entails personal sacrifice and often takes a physical toll on the body of the medicine person, all aspects of Native religious ideology that Silko fails to address in *Ceremony*. Reflecting on the sacrifices he makes to heal others, Lipsha remarks, “For one whole day, I felt this odd feeling that cramped my hands. When you have the touch, that’s where longing gets you” (234). Erdrich also notes that Lipsha is often alone and isolated, in part because of his family history, but also because his power gives him a different sense of the world and separates him from others who might fear his power. In this way, Erdrich carefully teaches the reader that medicine is not romantic, it is something a person is born with, not a choice, and can be a burden. In addition, Lipsha employs his “touch” by sensing a response in his body to others’ pain—something that can not be learned from a book or found in calendars or phone books. Finally, through Lipsha, Erdrich establishes an ethics of religious practice that is deeply traditional and which is necessary for readers to understand the end of the story within an Anishinaabe worldview.

In the scene where Lipsha takes Nector to church, Erdrich teaches the reader Anishinaabe views of how to solicit the help of spirit beings, while also illustrating why religious practices can be synchronic but not syncretic. In church, Nector hollers and shouts his prayers with such volume that Lipsha is embarrassed and finally asks why Nector prays this way, to which Nector calmly replies that the Christian God is hard of hearing—God has become deaf. Lipsha reflects on this opinion and notes that at least the Anishinaabe gods “come around. They’ll do you a favor if you ask them right. You don’t have to yell. But you do have to know, like

I said, how to ask in the right way” (236). Twice in this passage Lipsha voices that there are rules for working with spirit beings or medicine, a proper way to ask for help embedded in traditional practice. These rules are why, when Lipsha agrees to perform a love medicine for his grandmother, he feels his “back prickle at the danger. [. . .] Love medicines is not for the layman to handle. You don’t just go out and get one without paying for it. Before you get one, even, you should go through one hell of a lot of mental condensation. You got to think it over. [. . .] You could really mess up your life . . .” (241). Through Lipsha’s musings, the reader learns that this kind of power is not to be taken lightly and comes with serious consequences. Lipsha is *afraid*—like the Navajo and Tayo are of Betonie in *Ceremony*—and Erdrich’s use of “paying” implies what he is afraid of: there is a human cost to ceremonial activity. Experienced medicine people take the cost upon themselves, such as when Lipsha’s hands hurt after healing by touch, but if a medicine person is not careful, the price will be exacted by the medicine itself. Within the opening pages of the story, Erdrich carefully instructs readers that medicine is part of a complicated system of religious beliefs that emphasize respect of the spiritual world, and she does this without lengthy religious treatises. Unfortunately, Lipsha doesn’t ask for help in the proper, respectful way, and he doesn’t stop to “think it over.” Instead, he takes shortcuts.

The first mistake he makes is that he doesn’t consult his elder relative and medicine woman, Fleur Pillager, because he is terrified of her power. In a comic sense, this moment shows what a coward Lipsha is, but it also shows that tribal people take these forces very seriously. This is not harmless magic. Because he is

scared, Lipsha decides instead to create his own love medicine from a combination of rumor and pre-existing knowledge, finally deciding to use geese hearts, since geese mate for life. He borrows a gun and waits in the marsh all day. This time waiting in the novel is marked by a curious stream-of-consciousness passage where Lipsha muses about “funny things” that have happened: a bird flying up Lulu’s dress that never came out, dead or alive; a watch that a son wore even though it had stopped working when his father died, and which begins to work again after the son dies. He thinks, “Whose hand wound it?” (243-4). Then, the geese land and he narrates:

I lifted Grandpa’s gun to my shoulder and I aimed perfectly, and
blam! Blam! I delivered two accurate shots. But the thing is, them
 shots missed. I couldn’t hardly believe it. Whether it was that the
 stock had warped or the barrel got bent someways, I don’t quite
 know. (244)

At first, his thoughts about the bird and the watch that stopped working only to start again appear to have no connection to his missing the shots, yet the nature of these musings is important. Lipsha reflects on “mysterious” events for which the only explanation is spirits. While it is true that these events are ridiculous and funny, like the Anishinaabe tales of Wenabozho, they nonetheless imply the workings of a higher power, of mystery. Lipsha’s “accurate shots” miss for no clear explanation—except *they do*, a message he fails to receive and which should be explanation enough, since he hasn’t asked for guidance from his elders, prayed, or thought through the consequences of his actions fully. But in the Anishinaabe comitragic tradition,

missing the geese doesn't stop his plans.³³ Looking back on this moment, Lipsha thinks,

But I never saw at the time how my thoughts led me astray toward a tragic outcome none could have known. I ignored all the danger, all the limits. [. . .] I was chilled, so I played with fire. I told myself that love medicine was simple. I told myself that the old superstitions was just that—strange beliefs. [. . .] And here is what I did that made the medicine backfire. I took an evil shortcut. I looked at birds that was dead and froze. (245)

Even as Lipsha argues with himself about “malpractice suits” afterwards, confusing suits with clothing and Indigenous medicine people with scientific doctors, Erdrich foreshadows the tragic end of the story, drawing on the tragicomic tradition of her people. The decisions Lipsha has made are “evil” and the consequences will be fatal. Meanwhile, oblivious, he goes to the store and buys two frozen turkey hearts, then takes them home.

When Nector eats the thawed turkey heart, it gets lodged in his throat and he dies by choking in Lipsha's arms. In reviews and scholarly articles, many read the moment where Nector chokes as an accident, since as he holds the frozen turkey heart in his mouth and goads Marie with his insolence, she slaps him on the back, sending the heart down his throat. Although Marie's actions do contribute to Nector's choking, the complex rules Erdrich has already invoked and the end of the story suggest a different meaning altogether. As his grandfather lies dead in his arms, Lipsha looks up at his grandmother and notes, “I knew the fuse had blown between

my heart and my mind and that a terrible understanding was to be given” (251).

Erdrich’s word choice—that a terrible understanding “was to be given”—is deliberate in this moment, suggesting that the understanding is given by something unseen, for Nector doesn’t just choke “on the heart alone. There was more to it than that. It was other things that choked him as well,” like Lipsha’s arrogance, his cowardice, and his decision to reach beyond his abilities regardless of the consequences (250). Lawrence Gross notes in “The Comic Vision of Anishinaabe Culture and Religion” that there are four main principles which guide human interaction with spirits: “(1) relationships are reciprocal; (2) one should not do things beyond the power one has received; (3) one should not be greedy; (4) one must follow cultural rules and the terms of one’s arrangement with spiritual helpers” (443). Lipsha has followed none of these principles. He hasn’t asked for help in the proper way, he hasn’t made any sacrifices or offered the spirits anything for their help. He has reached beyond the limits of his power without proper guidance, and he has ignored all the traditional rules of conduct. Nector’s death might seem like punishment enough for his disrespect, but Lipsha suffers more than watching his grandmother’s grief and the loss of his grandfather: he loses his medicine. He comments, “I felt the touch retreat back into the darkness inside my body, from where it came” (Erdrich 251). In addition, forced to go before his time, Nector haunts Marie and Lipsha, restless and unable to find peace. Toward the end of the story, Lipsha tells Marie that they “shouldn’t have tampered” with love medicine and hopes that if his grandfather’s spirit appears to him, he can apologize and “tell him it was all my fault for playing with power I did not understand” (255).

Although Erdrich is clear that the medicine went horribly awry, Susan Perez-Castillo reads Lipsha's attempt at love medicine as "ultimately efficacious" (233). After all, she points out, he has managed to bring together Lulu and Marie, who become united after Nector's loss. However, once again this is a reductive reading of "medicine" as merely a metaphor and conflates the title of the novel with the religious views espoused within it. It is true that *Love Medicine* as a whole argues for community, family, and forgiveness—in other words, for love as a force that binds people together and heals the wounds of genocide and assimilation. Within this chapter, however, "medicine" is not a metaphor, and Lipsha's attempt to wield it inappropriately has actual physical consequences in the world. Perez-Castillo goes on to argue that "Love Medicine" illustrates syncretic values and how "Indians who live in a twentieth-century world . . . are not afraid to adapt and transform what they find useful in contemporary culture" (233). I agree, it does show that they are not afraid, but also why they *should* be. Often Erdrich's modern Native characters who move easily between twentieth-century pop culture and traditional values are seen as endorsements of syncretic cultural views rather than factual representations of the reality of what life is actually like on reservations across this country. Susan Stanford Friedman says that Erdrich has a desire to "avoid the polemical" and a "distrust of fundamentalist certainty about fixed truth" (108) and Catherine Rainwater agrees, writing "the text does not overdetermine one avenue of interpretation and thus endorse one theological view over the other" ("Reading" 410). But as Allen Chavkin shows, *Love Medicine* was revised in 1993, changing what many (including Michael Dorris and Louise Erdrich herself) saw as an apolitical novel into a work

that endorses “the importance of preserving American Indian culture and resisting complete assimilation” (93). “Love Medicine” is far from apolitical, and when viewed as operating within a religious framework, as I have done here, exhibits a strong resistance to assimilation, and shows how traditional religious views remain relevant, even in the modern age.

Further, Erdrich’s story doesn’t only argue for traditional maintenance of religious values, it also refuses the idea of religious syncretism completely by incorporating Christianity into Lipsha’s failed machinations. Like Silko, Erdrich’s views on cultural syncretism are influenced by tribal place and history, and the Anishinaabe were “greatly influenced by Catholic missionaries” (Friedman 118). Erdrich noted in an interview with Joseph Bruchac that her grandfather “had a real mixture of old time and church religion” (81). “That’s one of the strengths of Indian culture,” she said, agreeing with Silko’s views of incorporation discussed earlier in this chapter, “that you pick and choose and keep and discard” (79). However, she also commented that even if her grandfather practiced a syncretic form of religion, she has “beefs about Catholicism” and her views of Christianity in “Love Medicine” are far from ambivalent (81). After going to the grocery store to purchase the frozen hearts and before returning home, Lipsha takes them up to the mission to be blessed by a priest. The priest predictably refuses, as does the nun that Lipsha implores after him, so Lipsha dips into the holy water and blesses the hearts himself “quick, with my own hand” (248). Rather than functioning as an actual blessing of the hearts and saving Nector, Lipsha’s use of the holy water is yet another departure from tradition that cannot be washed away by the water itself. Perhaps this is because the blessing

wasn't properly performed by a priest (again, rules of proper religious conduct are broken); however, given the context of the story and the beliefs about God espoused by Nector, the story implies that the Christian God simply wasn't "pay[ing] attention" (236). Before even attempting to get the priest's blessing on the tragic hearts, Lipsha notes that it was just "one more step" further into a "lie," and any religious value Christianity might offer for healing is dismissed by a flick of Lipsha's fingers over frozen turkey hearts.

Lipsha eventually gains his "touch" back by the end of the story, but only through recognizing his mistakes and expressing his humility, only after Marie forgives him, and only after he re-recognizes his place in the order of things. He has learned "how to accept death as part of living" and been forgiven, which constitutes a proper ending for a traditional Anishinaabe trickster tales (Gross 440). As he uses Nector's dandelion fork to pry weeds from the ground, he states, "the touch got stronger the longer I worked through the grassy afternoon. Uncurling from me like a seed out of the blackness where I was lost, the touch spread" (258). Erdrich finishes the chapter with lines that make clear that medicine—the power that flows through and behind all living things—comes from the earth itself, and it is only through respect and humility that it can be harnessed and used. It is a gift, or a burden, but not something that can be manipulated or invented.

The Religious Divide

Nector's death is the terrible consequence of playing with this power and of deciding to invent one's own ceremonies, "Love Medicine" asserts. It is not

ambiguous about this. While it is true that Lipsha is younger than Betonie in *Ceremony*, and has not had time to grow into his powers or to train with another medicine person, he becomes an example of why traditional religious ways must be maintained and respected. For Erdrich, this story is not fundamentalist; it is about respect for the spirits and the power of medicine itself, for which human beings are only living conduits. “Love Medicine” is a sharp retort to Betonie’s views in *Ceremony* and a warning to all those who want to believe that by reading Silko’s novel they are partaking in a ceremony itself. Practicing Indigenous medicine is far more complicated than merely reading a text and involves harnessing a power that can be dangerous.

As these writers endeavor to form stable identities for themselves as mixed-blood tribal and American citizens, their early work illustrates their struggle to form a relationship with their own Indigenous cosmologies and religious beliefs that reflects a divide throughout Indian country over the “purity” of religious practice. Tribes across this nation face continuing pressure to fully assimilate into modern American life, and often this includes casting off “primitive” religious practices, particularly for young people who cannot yet recognize the way these practices ground their identities. The difference of opinion between Silko and Erdrich shows opposing views on how to respond to the pressure that assimilation exerts on religious practices. Some Native people believe religious views need to evolve and become more inclusive, while others believe traditional tribal practice remains the answer to cultural perpetuation and healing. And yet, Silko’s endorsement of religious adaptation as a means of cultural survival and tribal healing does not necessarily

persist throughout the rest of her work, which becomes increasingly interested in showing the confluences and divergences among ancient world religions (particularly in *Gardens in the Dunes*), rather than strictly focusing on Laguna religious beliefs.

“Love Medicine” reflects beliefs Erdrich reinforces in later novels, such as *Tracks* or *Four Souls*, but she also wrote novels, such as *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* that are more sympathetic to Christian and integrated religious values.

Although their beliefs may change, in these two early novels both Silko and Erdrich write from identity locations that are tribally and geographically specific, locating themselves in a larger cultural conversation. That they reach opposing views on religious practice is significant because it shows the immense diversity among tribal groups and the complexity of Indigenous cultural politics, regardless of tribal affiliation or identity position. Equally revealing, however, is the fact that they both feel the need to adopt a firm stance on religious issues in their very first novels (which is also true for Susan Power, Sherman Alexie, and Louis Owens), illustrating just how central the battle over religion remains in Native cultural politics. Taking a stance on religious vitality has become one of the ways authors establish identity as *Native* and locate themselves within Indigenous cultural politics. While Euroamerican readers may miss the importance of this conversation, the stances that Silko and Erdrich adopt, though different, are equally controversial within Native communities. Silko advocates a more modern approach to religious practice and views other sources of knowledge just as important to Indigenous understanding of the world as traditional religious views, while Erdrich rejects the pressure of assimilation using cultural views on how medicine works. For all their differences,

however, both attempt to envision a “traditional future,” locating hope in Indigenous knowledge and ceremonial practices and arguing that, though they may change, these practices remain the foundation of identity even in the modern age.

Chapter Four:
Deliberate Silences in “Bicenti” by Anna Lee Walters
and *The Sharpest Sight* by Louis Owens

[T]he silences that are the counterpart to the spoken words and sounds of life are deep and profound. After the words, the stories, and the songs, always come silence we are told. The spaces of silence are given to ponder all the mysteries of the universe and our own existence in relation to the mystery of the whole. When the silence eventually moves us to speak, we know the power of silence and our own words. *Remember both, we are told.*

-- Anna Lee Walters, *Talking Indian*

For years, scholars in Native American studies have investigated how Indigenous writers mediate their work to help non-Native readers bridge the gap between two often contradictory worldviews. James Ruppert, in *Mediation in Contemporary Native American Fiction*, argues that “the contemporary Native American novel is oriented toward a restructuring of readers’ preconceptions and expectations” and maneuvers readers into “different ways of knowing” (ix). Catherine Rainwater, in a similar volume titled *Dreams of Fiery Stars: The Transformations of Native American Fiction*, writes that while Native “authors variously deconstruct conventional modes and their readers’ interpretive practices, they simultaneously instate and foster alternatives”(xv). My own work participates in the critical impulse of focusing on mediation, especially in my first chapter, which discusses how Susan Power inducts non-Native readers into a Dakota worldview through selective translation and related strategies that teach an audience how to read her novel. Indeed, thinking about mediation and how Native American writers speak to non-Native reading audiences has become quite central in Native American literary studies.

But what about writers who have little interest in mediating their texts and who work within cultural paradigms that they refuse to explain? As everyone working in Native American Studies knows, a growing group of readers of Native American literature is culturally knowledgeable and no longer needs writers to help them understand tribal epistemologies. More Indigenous people are entering the academy, becoming teachers and scholars of Native literature, history, and art. In parts of Arizona and in Hawaii, children's books have been published entirely in Indigenous languages, and the use of untranslated Native languages is occurring with increasing frequency in contemporary poetry and fiction as well. In addition, academic presses now publish work viewed as commercially unviable by the corporate publishing industry, but which nonetheless has a select and loyal group of readers.³⁴ This group of readers does not need the (often unwieldy) meta-textual explanation frequently present in contemporary Native-authored novels.

At the same time, there are also many lay-readers of Native American fiction, readers who, inspired by Louise Erdrich or Sherman Alexie, may pick up a novel by Louis Owens or Gerald Vizenor. When this occurs, Rainwater observes, "profound cultural differences [can] interfere with mainstream readers' understanding" (xi). And while it is true that the vast majority of Native American literature is written in English, and so is already necessarily mediated,³⁵ increasingly Native artists refuse to explain cultural values to audiences who lack Native cultural knowledge. In this chapter, I focus on two such works—"Bicenti" (1991) by Anna Lee Walters and *The Sharpest Sight* (1992) by Louis Owens—to show how the silence, or lack of cultural explanation, that surrounds their medicine people characters declares a political

position: the refusal to mediate between cultures or meet unknowledgeable readers on familiar ground. Before I turn to the texts, however, I first want to clarify what I mean by “deliberate silence” and the way I see it working within both texts.

Silence as Deliberate, Self-Adopted, and Indigenous

By using the word “silence,” I do not mean silence imposed by one culture onto another, although this is clearly how hegemony operates in relation to the “Other.” Nor am I addressing silence as the refusal to hear. Rather, in this chapter I am talking about self-adopted silence, the refusal to *speak* or explain. In *Perspectives on Silence*, Muriel Saville-Troike writes that silence has “traditionally been ignored except for its boundary-marking function” (3), which helps explain why it remains hard to discuss or theorize. In this chapter, I will focus on silence not as “absence of sound” but as “part of communication” (4), as marking a space of *intention*. As Saville-Troike notes, “the time-spaces occupied by silence constitute an active presence (not absence) of communication” and silences are more “context-embedded than speech” (10, 11). This is particularly true, I argue, when silence surrounds medicine people in Native American fiction. In these texts, silence is a political statement, a withholding of necessary information, and also replicates Indigenous beliefs about how to greet, or function within, the presence of the sacred.

In this way, silence in “Bicenti” and in *The Sharpest Sight* functions similarly to self-adopted silences of other oppressed groups. In works by African American women, for example, silence can note “expressive politics,” illustrating how both “language and silence may be tools of the Master or tools of rebellion against

patriarchal determinations of meaning,” according to Christanne Miller (139).

Looking at poetry by African American women writers, Miller notes that ellipses, page breaks, enjambment, and the spacing of words textually figure a silence that “is a form of communication that those who rely on the hegemonic word of private authority cannot hear” (151). This is also true in “Bicenti” and *The Sharpest Sight*.

Both use page breaks and chapter interruptions to denote silence, and, in turn, refuse to suture these pieces together for the reader. They also employ silence to imply tribal cosmologies to readers who already know how to read these cosmologies—as part of, and structuring—the story itself.

The silence that surrounds medicine people and tribal religious views in “Bicenti” and *The Sharpest Sight* is *intentional*. In this way, not only does silence mark “mystery” in both texts, as Walters notes in my epigraph, it also mimics the behavior one would adopt in the presence of medicine people or during a ceremony, and this is how silence is radically different in these Indigenous texts when compared to silences expressed by other oppressed groups. For example, Keith Basso explains that in the practices of the Western Apache, silence is part of ceremonial activity and is particularly important to the participants in the ceremony itself.³⁶ It is also a cultural value, reflecting the time spent thinking about the words of a speaker before responding, in this case very close to the silence held by those in a ceremony because they are both signals of respect. Walters writes about this multiple times in *Talking Indian*, a volume of short stories and essays about the oral tradition. In it, she asserts that the power of expression is only recognized by silence, and that during it, “other affirmations about the universe and life were absorbed through the other senses”

(14). For her, silence is an important part of receiving a story, and occupies the space where one thinks about how the story speaks to the listener's own knowledge and life. Without it, she argues, identity as an Indigenous person is not possible, because silence is "necessary" to absorb "the integrity of what they have been told about their universe and their place within it" (17-18).

N. Scott Momaday agrees, remarking about the oral tradition that "expression, rather than communication, is often first in importance" and that because of this, "silence too is powerful. It is the dimension in which ordinary and extraordinary events take their proper places" (16). In both "Bicenti" and *The Sharpest Sight*, silence is indeed where the "extraordinary"—or Indigenous knowledge of medicine and the sacred—takes its place among the ordinary plot developments of the text. When faced with a complete lack of explanation, readers are forced to acknowledge the limits of their own knowledge and, ideally, realize that some things are beyond human ability to comprehend. This is why "Bicenti," a bizarre little story that explains nothing and raises more questions than it answers, is granted a place within an anthology designed to introduce readers to the "enduring values" of Native American cultures (Lesley xvi). It confronts readers with the unreadable, with an unwillingness to write solely for people who lack cultural knowledge. Indeed, both Walters's and Owens's silence declare that Native writers have been working to meet the expectations and needs of their audiences for far too long, and it is time for these audiences to either educate themselves, or conclude that some Native writing is not meant for them. For Owens in particular, shrouding his medicine people in silence

is his way of writing for a select audience, those who are Indigenous, or already “in the know.”

Repairing Time in “Bicenti”

Different kinds of presses published “Bicenti” and *The Sharpest Sight* and ultimately marketed them to different audiences. While *The Sharpest Sight* inaugurated a series of novels aimed at knowledgeable readers, remarkably “Bicenti” appeared in a commercially marketed anthology designed for a wide reading audience. The 1991 anthology *Talking Leaves: Contemporary Native American Short Stories*, edited by acclaimed writer Craig Lesley, was compiled to introduce casual readers of Native American literature to an expanded canon of writers in addition to the “noble nine.”³⁷ The collection includes stories by well-known and popular writers such as Sherman Alexie, Louise Erdrich, and N. Scott Momaday, along with other less well known writers and poets, such as Debra Earling, Roger Jack, and Vickie Sears. Many of the stories are selections of already published or future works. However, “Bicenti” is not part of a larger whole. It is complete unto itself, a short fragmentary story that is unique in the book for the ideology it espouses as well as for the way it refuses to contextualize the events of the narrative for its readers.

“Bicenti” begins with the line, “*Things weren’t right,*” and the ominous tone continues throughout (304, emphasis original). In the story, Maya is visiting her friend Wilma in Santa Fe, and as the afternoon passes into evening, both women relate “strange” or “bizarre” events that have happened to them in the past few months. Maya is upset because some personal items were stolen from her, and

afterward, every time she drives, fatal car accidents happen mere cars away. In turn, Wilma tells Maya that a car parked in her neighbor's driveway at night was found in the morning flipped neatly upside down and put back in place. The women pass an uneasy night and awaken in the morning to find a dead dog draped over the hood of Maya's car, its blood covering the windows and the ground. They clean up the mess in an eerily silent neighborhood, and then encounter "the man," a figure that terrifies them both. After this encounter, Maya leaves, and Wilma goes to see Bicenti, the medicine man for whom the story is titled.

This is the entire plot, and it is hard to figure out what the story is about, exactly, since Walters gives very little extra-textual information to instruct readers how to understand the events that affect the women, whether or not they are related, or even how readers should view "the man," who, as I will show, is both human and other-than-human. However, read within an Indigenous worldview, particularly within Navajo religious beliefs, the entire story begins to make sense.³⁸ First, Walters uses ceremonial time throughout, which is circular, fluid, and experiential, and as such, connects all the events in the story even if the connections themselves remain a mystery. Notations of time are mentioned on nearly every page of the narrative: afternoon shadows "move across the floor" (304), time passing is noted by Wilma's lengthening shadow (305), and as the women talk, the "planes of the room were elongated, distorted by the hour at hand" (306). Time is physical in this text, experienced and *moved through*. Yet, this Indigenous concept of time is as hard for non-Native people to grasp as it is to explain. The ceremonial time in the narrative is then disrupted, or *ruptured*, by "the man"—an act not possible within Euroamerican

epistemology—who is equally difficult to read outside of Indigenous religious beliefs. Before interrogating what Walters’s use of time tells us, however, we must first understand who “the man” is and how he functions within the narrative.

“The Man” first appears after the death of the dog and is described as:

. . . dark, possibly Hispanic or Indian. He bobbed up and down, as if there were springs in his legs and feet. He waved his arms imitating a grounded bird, and he contorted his face into grotesque masks that changed and flitted away as quickly as they settled over his features. Then his hands went to the crotch of his pants and he mimed an unearthly performance, contorting his body beyond the bounds of human ability. (315)

Although Walters uses the masculine pronoun and notes the man is possibly Hispanic or Indian, the way he moves is “unearthly” and “beyond the bounds of human ability”; we are never sure he is fully *human*. At one point, Wilma calls him a “thing” (315). He is described similarly in the story two more times, once when Maya tells him he isn’t welcome and he “poised himself in the interlude, unnaturally immobile,” and again when Maya sees him “suspended . . . on a background of cumulus clouds . . . detached from the earth and everything that Wilma and Maya knew” (315). In all three descriptions, Walters uses some form of “unearthly” or “unnatural,” implying that “the man” exists beyond natural laws and boundaries. Walters never explicitly tells the reader how to read this figure, how to interpret his appearance or meaning in the narrative itself, but she does give clues, which brings us back to the concept of time the story operates within.

When Wilma confronts the man for the first time, Walters writes, he “ceased his gyrations for a split second *fracturing time and space*” (315, italics mine). She reiterates this statement a few sentences later, when Maya says, “Our people understand . . . this kind of fracture of space and time. . .” (316). But how are casual readers of Native American Literature, readers for whom time is chronological, progressive, and above all, *stable*, to understand time and space that has “fractured”? The perception of time is a deeply cultural construct, one Walters does not explain for her readers. Because of this, how the story ends, with Bicenti repairing “the tiniest fracture in infinite space and time,” does not provide any kind of recognizable resolution in Western terms (318). Ending the story in this way declares that the foundation of the text lies in Indigenous concepts of how the world works, which includes possibilities beyond those commonly held by most Euroamericans. Consequently, many readers will leave this text never understanding that it is about the ongoing struggle to maintain balance in the world, in which humans play an integral part. The fact that Walters does not take time to explain this shrouds the entire narrative in a silence. It is worth asking, then, why Walters would submit this particular story to an anthology meant for wide commercial distribution. Precisely because, I suggest, Walters wants to confront readers’ expectations of readability. With “Bicenti,” which is far less mediated than the others in the volume, and so less easy to comprehend, she wants to challenge readers’ views of how the world works and how they construct their own knowledge. This is very different from other selections in the anthology, all of which are easily accessible to any reader. For example, “Bicenti” is preceded by “China Browne,” from Vizenor’s *Tricksters of*

Liberty and followed by a selection from *Fools Crow* by James Welch, both pieces that are self-contained and, if readers need more contextualization, they can buy the novels. Unlike these two pieces, however, and many others in the anthology, “Bicenti” was not included in Waters’s short story collection, *The Sun is Not Merciful*, nor in her novel *Ghost Singer*. It is a narrative that stands alone, although invoking other, hushed, religious narratives that complete it.

When compared to Walters’s other works, which spend a great deal of time explaining to readers how they should analyze events or people (particularly *Ghost Singer*), “Bicenti” is even more remarkable. Similar to *Ghost Singer*, the pieces of “Bicenti” also do not add up to a seamless whole and there are more unanswered questions than issues resolved. This is one of the trademarks of Walters’s work. Catherine Rainwater notes that *Ghost Singer* “cannot adequately be explained within any traditional western frame of reference”; in fact, she observes, it employs narratives and counter narratives to show the difference between Euroamerican and Indigenous ways of seeing (49). But “Bicenti” has no counter narratives. It is, itself, the counter narrative, usually positioned in comparison, but, instead, simply presented here “as is.” It is a story where readers must struggle with what is outside of their understanding, and with an author who refuses to explain these concepts to them. Rainwater notes that narratives like this, as in *Ghost Singer*, can also “lend themselves to standard misinterpretations,” a risk Walters obviously believes is worth taking. Like N. Scott Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn*, readers of “Bicenti” have three options: “seek extratextual information, (mis)read within an inappropriate framework, or give up” (12). If nothing else, readers walk away from this story

wondering what it is about, and this itself is useful. That they should encounter material that prevents them from fully understanding a Native-authored text is a declaration that valuable cultural material will not be made easily available to them. Yet, even for culturally knowledgeable readers, Walters's story contains a great deal of mystery, which marks a different kind of silence "Bicenti" performs, one rooted in a Navajo framework that, like their tribal origin story, emphasizes mystery and the limits of human knowledge³⁹, a distinctly Indigenous silence.

This kind of silence Walters actually writes into the text. After Maya and Wilma encounter "the man" for the last time, Maya asks if she is going crazy, to which Wilma responds, ". . . don't mention this, *what's happened here*, to anyone. You know what I mean, other than the likes of Bicenti. Few people understand, have seen beyond. . ." (316, italics original). This is when Maya replies, "Our people understand . . . this kind of fracture of space and time. . ." (316). The ellipses in these two sentences do not signal artful editing on my part; rather, they are original to the text, signs that there are some concepts that language cannot address. These concepts, like mystery, can only be addressed fully by silence as the counterpart to speech, the moment that we are, or should be, forced to "ponder all the mysteries of the universe and our own existence in relation to the mystery of the whole" (*Talking Indian* 105). This concept of "mystery" is very important to Walters, and she forces her readers to grapple with it through both kinds of silences "Bicenti" demarcates: political and Indigenous.

In "Solving Mysteries of Culture and Self," Melissa Fiesta points out that "mystery has long been a part of Navajo culture" and is an integral aspect of their

creation myth, in which gods appear to the people, but the people cannot understand them. Fiesta argues that Walters's first novel, *Ghost Singer*, performs the same narrative as the creation story by putting the reader "in the position of the first Navajo people" (370), and I believe "Bicenti" does this as well, but the narrative doesn't tell us this is its purpose. In fact, unlike the characters in either *Ghost Singer* or "Bicenti," the readers of *Talking Leaves*, the anthology "Bicenti" was published in, may not have "spirituality" that "helps them accept that not all mysteries can be solved" (Fiesta 371). Speaking about *Ghost Singer*, Walters noted in an interview that not all problems "have easy solutions" and that the goal of her writing is to force readers to "experience another view of the world besides the one they've always known. There's magic in doing this, and enrichment" (Carrol 72). She goes on to comment, "We as humans don't have to know all there is about everything. If we did, there would be no magic, no wonder" (72). This is the function she hopes her writing will perform. She confronts non-Native readers with a reality they cannot easily assimilate into their own in order to maintain a deliberate silence that is both necessary and intimately related to Indigenous theological views of the world. Her method signals the gap between two ways of knowing that she is not willing to help readers bridge.

"Seeing" with Choctaw Eyes

The Sharpest Sight explains even less about the presence of its medicine people characters, although in some ways it is a far more mediated text than "Bicenti." Like "Bicenti," silence signals Owens's unwillingness to translate deep cultural concepts,

in this case because it was written for an audience comprised of culturally knowledgeable readers. Silence is also maintained in the presence of the sacred in *The Sharpest Sight*, but in a way that is entirely different from Walters *because it is never spoken of at all*. This silence is a great deal harder to talk about than lack of explanation or textual ellipses that mark mystery. Instead, in *The Sharpest Sight* the silence held in the presence of the sacred is embodied by Luther Cole, who symbolizes Choctaw religious beliefs that are also never explained. He functions as a placeholder, heavy with symbolism that is referenced, but not expounded upon. Owens's silence, then, is both political and cultural simultaneously.

Yet *The Sharpest Sight* is a more mediated text than "Bicenti" because it contains at least one narrative any reader can understand. Set in the small town of Amarga, located on the banks of the Salinas river in California, the primary narrative of the novel resolves the mystery of Attis McCurtain's disappearance from the local Veteran's hospital. Suffering from PTSD after returning home from Vietnam, Attis accidentally killed his girlfriend in the midst of a nightmare; he has been at the hospital ever since. The murder-mystery plot, which answers the question of who made Attis's escape possible and then killed him, follows his best friend Mundo, his father Hoey, and his brother Cole as they separately attempt to solve Attis's murder. This is the simple plot of the novel, but as Mundo, Hoey, and Cole investigate, questioning people in the town and stalking the river for Attis's remains, Luther Cole—who is Hoey's uncle from Mississippi—interjects repeatedly into this narrative. Luther is the only character whose presence has no impact on the events of the mystery plot, which unfold in California while he remains in Mississippi. He is

in the story for a different reason. His character anchors the other, Choctaw, narrative that operates congruently with the plot and is invested in whether or not Cole will fulfill his ceremonial duty by becoming a Bone Picker and thus save Attis's soul. This simultaneous narrative relies on cultural understanding and is embedded in Indigenous views, which are not explained by the narrative itself. To see it operating within the larger story, the novel asserts, requires a certain kind of "sight." Not knowing how to read this additional narrative does not preclude understanding the primary murder story; in spite of this, there are large portions of the novel that will not make sense, or seem extraneous, to readers who lack this information. Owens weaves the Choctaw version into the murder-mystery through the musings of Luther Cole, who is a medicine person and the embodiment of Choctaw religious beliefs, as well as by continually—and often ironically—returning to the trope of sight, which again returns us to Luther in a kind of circuit that loops throughout the novel. But before discussing Luther, we must understand how "sight" in the novel continually refers to Native worldviews that the narrative is invested in, wants to privilege, and in turn, *performs*.

Owens introduces these concepts in the first scene as Mundo patrols the banks of the Salinas. Doing his job as town deputy, Mundo scans the area around the car with a spotlight, when suddenly a panther appears in the middle of the road. The panther quickly disappears as Mundo gets out of the car with his gun drawn, and as the rain in "sudden threads" creates the "luminous web of a spider," Owens writes of the panther, "What did it signify?" (4-5) Similar to Walters's references about the fracturing of time, Owens interrupts the narrative to call attention to the

panther, and like Walters, refuses to explain how the panther means. (He also refuses to explain, or even call attention to, the spider web, yet another Choctaw symbol.) As the rain beats down, Mundo gets back into his car, and the story continues.

Christopher LaLonde, in his book-length study on Louis Owens, writes that Mundo's spotlight in the opening scene is a metaphor for "Owens's relationship to writing and the literary text as he sees the dominant culture's instrument of authority to illuminate and reveal that which has been concealed" (62). I agree, in part, with LaLonde's assessment: the spotlight is a metaphor for how some ways of seeing are privileged, particularly under the guise of "authority." Mundo is, after all, a cop. Together with his name, Mundo symbolizes the rule of law that the world operates under. In turn, Owens as author uses the authority of text, which he knows is privileged in the western world above oral tradition, to interrogate how we "see" and construct knowledge, and to show what kinds of worldviews are privileged. But what LaLonde misses in his reading is that the panther Mundo illuminates quickly disappears from view. He is seen only briefly, and no amount of "authority" will make him reappear. The readers' quick glimpse of the panther—a potent symbol of death within Choctaw cosmology—prefigures how all Choctaw beliefs will be treated by Owens throughout the story: glimpsed but not spoken, continually present, but not necessarily visible to those who lack the proper sight. Owens is not interested in *revealing* "that which has been concealed." Rather, he marks its place with silence that can be filled only by the right kind of readers. Those familiar with Choctaw spiritual beliefs, for example, know this panther is not a good sign, and seconds later when

Mundo sees Attis's body float down the river, their suspicions are confirmed. The panther is looking for a soul, beginning the other, *alternative* narrative to this otherwise fast-paced murder mystery.

With the very first scene, then, Owens privileges sight that originates in Indigenous worldviews, which are then embodied in the text by Luther Cole. This is reinforced in the novel repeatedly, but is most clearly exhibited in a scene that exemplifies how Owens positions Luther as the textual placeholder for Choctaw religious beliefs as well as cultural critic extraordinaire. In the only place in the novel where the two narratives come together, Luther has caused two government agents, who are looking for Cole so they can draft him into the army at the time of the Vietnam war, to get lost in the swamp in the middle of the night. As the men blunder through the swamp in circles, terrorized by the loss of their matches and by the cries of the same panther we see earlier,⁴⁰ Onatima comes to Luther's cabin to enquire what has happened to the men. "I seen them," Luther remarks, adding, "us Indians always end up on the short end when government men come around. These two are having an interesting experience right now" (114). As he gets ready to leave the house and rescue the men, Luther instructs Cole to leave the flashlights at home, ostensibly because "lights make targets" (116), but later, as the four men make their way back to the cabin, Cole notes that Luther picks his way through the woods easily. As Cole slips, Luther instructs him, "if you see only the trail, it will become clear" (123). Cole concentrates, and then "a thread somewhat lighter than the surrounding dark" appears before him (123). In an obvious parody of romantic Indians from early American literature who can walk in the dark forest at night

without disturbing a leaf, Owens shows that Luther's understanding of the world isn't mystical: he knows these woods intimately. After years of living in the swamps of Mississippi on his own, Luther has come to a relational understanding with the environment around him. He is part of it, bound to it for survival. This is what he tries to teach his grandson as well, showing there are other ways of seeing, ways that are intimately connected with geography and living in relation to place. The government agents, despite the authority and power that their flashlights and guns suggest, trip and stumble after Luther and Cole. Government authority and Euroamerican hegemonic power is fundamentally flawed, the novel argues, because there are things it cannot—or will not—see or hear.

This trope of sight continually brings the novel back to Luther, who in turn symbolizes the kind of sight the novel privileges, and performs, by presenting an alternative narrative that non-Native readers will not understand. In the novel, Luther is a unique character. He fades in and out of the fog in the swamps of Mississippi, lives in a shack only reachable by boat, and seems to come from another, more ancient, time. But Owens makes Luther an approachable character as well. Unlike the medicine people in "Bicenti," he is fully humanized by his humor, his keen mind, and his flirtation with Onatima Bluewood, an older woman who lives nearby and has extraordinary powers of her own. The fact that Luther is humanized and portrayed as a real man with real concerns and feelings marks him as incredibly different from the medicine figures we see in "Bicenti," and perhaps makes him harder to read, because within the boundaries of Euroamerican epistemology, the abilities Luther has are simply not possible. For example, he travels in his dreams,

manipulates events in California from Mississippi, speaks to ghosts, reads nature to interpret the balance of the world, uses water as a “scrying glass,” and, as we have just seen, can cause people to lose their bearings. How Luther accomplishes these acts is not explained—he functions within the “mystery” Walters invokes as unknowable and Owens respects with silence.

Because of Owens’s silence, Luther is also often an *unreadable* figure. In other words, in Luther’s chapters, Owens withholds any information that might clarify the religious views Luther symbolizes. When we first meet him, Owens writes,

To follow the soul-eater so far across a single night had been difficult, more so than he could have imagined. To bring about the convergence of the nephew, the dark-skinned one, and *nalusachito* had required almost more strength than he had. And then to will the *shilombish* back here where it belonged and could be dealt with. That was hard for an old man. And dangerous, risking still more accusations of witchcraft, should anyone find out. He grinned wryly, thinking that if the people feared him now out here in the swamp, they would piss their pants if they knew the truth.

(7, italics original)

Like Walters’s use of time, how are readers to make sense of the concepts used in this passage? We don’t know who “the nephew” and the “dark-skinned one” are, and Owens’s use of untranslated terms, in addition to “soul-eater,” confront the reader with the unintelligible. If Owens were to explain, this is where he would need to do it, a mere seven pages into the narrative. Although we get answers to some of

our questions later (such as who the people are that he refers to, as well as a definition of *shilombish* and “soul-eater”) Owens playfully withholds any information that would make it clear to readers why this mysterious “convergence” is necessary or what exactly Luther has been doing from his bed in Mississippi. He refuses to answer: what *is* Luther, and how is it possible for him to see these things? And yet, the passage above is representative of the way Luther is written throughout. Owens is purposely cryptic. Rather than embody an empty shell that contains nothing, Luther contains an entire system of religious beliefs that are too complex for Owens to explain here. Telling the reader that Luther can perform these acts without explaining how it is done, or the religious views that underpin a medicine person him/herself, Owens reinforces the barriers that make this novel fully accessible to a very select group of readers. Owens, like Walters, comes dangerously close to allowing his narrative to be viewed as “fantastical” by readers who don’t understand this material. For some, his story might seem to stray into the realm of Magical Realism. Again like Walters, however, Owens is not writing to mediate this text for readers who may misread.

Since Luther lives radically outside of mainstream society, he is also its best critic, able to see clearly through the simulacra of modern society to reveal its underlying ideology. Using Luther, Owens links canonical literature to national narratives that result in oppressive government policy and shows how, from within other knowledge systems, the stories we tell as a nation actually celebrate what Owens calls elsewhere “a deadly kind of innocence” (Purdy 11). For example, Luther states that *Moby Dick* is about “the white man storyteller [who] come

bouncing up to the surface of the ocean on that Indian's coffin," and he connects this with the federal policy of Indian removal: "you know, grandson, us Choctaws signed nine treaties with the government, smoking the pipe nine times, and everytime it's just like this book. 'The white man comes riding to the surface on a Indian's coffin'" (*Sight* 90-1). He also critiques *Huckleberry Finn* and a history of the Choctaws by H.B. Cushman. About the later, he remarks sarcastically, "this is a good book. Tells us all about ourselves." Then he proceeds to read a passage that romanticizes the beauty of the Choctaw, and quips, "This here writer was a man of rare intelligence. For a white man" (88). In addition, Luther voices an eco-critique based in Indigenous theories about the environment, for the entire novel unfolds on the banks of the Salinas river, which Luther notes has been "broken" (26). Later in the novel, Luther connects the broken river to the Vietnam war (which "broke" Attis), and the genocide and displacement of Indian people. He remarks, "It's part of a circle, you see, and they broke the circle when they broke that river. And they're doing that all over the world, breaking all the circles" (98). He articulates one of Owens's main arguments as an author and critic: Euroamerican narratives, of self and nation, of science and technology, of history and inevitability, must change, and in order to change these stories, we must listen to—or learn how to see—other kinds of stories.

First, we have to see the stories we tell ourselves for what they are. And while Owens isn't invested in teaching readers how to make sense of the Choctaw narrative in his novel, he is interested in challenging the way knowledge is constructed and which kinds of narratives are privileged over others, as he points out

by rewriting several pieces of canonical American literature through the text. Carolyn Holbert shows in her article “Stranded in the Wasteland” how Owens makes allusions to Shakespeare, Edward Lear, Robert Frost, and T.S. Eliot,⁴¹ and to that list I will add Herman Melville, John Steinbeck, theologian Jonathan Edwards, and Mark Twain. These allusions are accessible to an audience not familiar with Choctaw religious beliefs, and Owens rewrites these works—particularly Melville and Twain—to undermine romantic stereotypes and to bring the reader back, yet again, to the Choctaw narrative. For example, the title, *The Sharpest Sight*, is taken from a sermon by Jonathan Edwards called “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” which is completely rewritten through Owens’s story. In the sermon, Edwards told his congregation that God would punish them for their sins by striking them down with “arrows of death” which “fly unseen at noonday; the sharpest sight cannot discern them” (qtd in LaLonde 68). The novel, however, repossesses sight. Those who have the “sharpest sight”—Luther, Cole, and the intended audience—are those who can see that we have moved away from our fundamental relationships with all living things. That is, the “sharpest sight” is *Indigenious*. It is the sight of those who can “see” the Choctaw narrative lying silent beside the crime narrative.

The Sharpest Sight ends not when Attis’s killer has been brought to justice, but rather when Cole embraces his position as a Choctaw ceremonial Bone Picker and puts Attis’s restless soul at peace. He and Hoey leave California to bring the bones back to Mississippi, reversing the Trails of Tears, “homing-in” as William Bevis notes so many novels do. Yet this return home leads not to the reservation in Oklahoma, but to the original ancestral homelands of the Choctaw, the swamps of

Mississippi, and to Luther, the keeper of the religious tradition. Alluding to the Cherokee healing ceremony called “Going to Water,”⁴² Cole brings his brother’s bones—as well as himself and his father—home, to a place where there is “air like water, water like earth” (11). Owens never discusses the healing ceremony of “Going to Water” in *The Sharpest Sight*, just like he never fully explains the panoply of repeating symbols which originate from Choctaw tradition or how Luther performs his many feats. While Mundo, Hoey, and Cole search for Attis’s killer, the Choctaw narrative in this novel is, like the “silent” story in “Bicenti,” about restoring balance; and solving Attis’s murder has little to do with that. In turn, the critiques voiced by Luther Cole—environmental, historical, and critical of federal policy—come from Indigenous worldviews that are never themselves articulated, merely implied. These critiques and repeating Choctaw symbols mark the boundaries of a very important, if silent, center, embodied by Luther Cole. As Owens writes toward the end of the novel, “Medicine’s got to go beyond these swamps now, got to go out all through the world, because the whole world’s out of whack and people like us Indians is the onliest ones that knows how to fix it” (*Sight* 90).

This is Owens’s sentiment too, but he isn’t going to teach these ways to a reader who doesn’t understand them. Instead, he is going to signal them, and going to show, as the narrative does for Cole time and again, where these views originate from. By maintaining a silence that has always surrounded the sacred for Indigenous peoples, Owens chooses to be respectful of the worldviews he was taught. Perhaps he doesn’t want to risk the consequences some argue Silko invited when using sacred stories in writing *Ceremony*. However, based on Owens’s comments elsewhere about

the publishing industry and the pressure commercial publishing exerts on popular Native writers to mediate their work, I believe the silences in *The Sharpest Sight* are deliberate, and profound, because they signal a new direction in Native American literature, a desire to write solely for Indigenous people, and an unwillingness to capitulate to popular sentiment in order to be published. As *Other Destinies* shows, Owens was very savvy about what kinds of novels were being published by whom, and for whom, and he clearly saw the political implications in these choices. In an interview with John Purdy in 1998, Owens remarked that getting published in the corporate publishing industry as a Native fiction writer was increasingly difficult, commenting:

I see a number of novel manuscripts by young Indian writers that are just not going to be published in New York, and they are among the best novels I see, the most honest; they are dealing with tribal people today who are in reservation communities, or in cities, mixedbloods, or full bloods, or whatever, but they are writing about real experience, what's happening today, which includes working on your car, or having a microwave oven, the realities of life today and not being a mystical shaman. Not to say that ceremony, and traditions and spirituality are not terribly important, because they are in the communities, but what New York and Hollywood want to see are warriors, shamans, mystical medicine women, and anger, and above all, self-destruction. Dysfunction and self-destruction are marketable commodities. (Purdy 19)

Owens knew precisely the stereotypes readers expected to see in Native work, the same stereotypes they expected—and were given repeatedly—by popular media.⁴³ He chose, instead, to publish with small academic presses. *The Sharpest Sight* and *Other Destinies: Understanding the American Indian Novel* were two of the inaugural books in the *American Indian Literature and Critical Studies Series* edited by Gerald Vizenor for The University of Oklahoma Press. Writing with presses like Oklahoma allowed him, Owens said, “to write exactly as I want to write. [. . .] it is a tremendous liberation” (21). Reading the canon of Owens’s fictional work, it is easy to see why he repeatedly made that choice. All of his fiction works on two levels. Commenting on his novel *Nightland*, Owens remarked that it was written from a distinctly Cherokee point of view, and when writing, he had his aunt in mind. He said, “I knew my aunt would recognize a lot that most readers of the novel will miss. I never believe in explaining my own writing, though I happily explain other peoples” (11).

It is not surprising that Owens felt this way, particularly after publishing *Other Destinies*, a critical work that considers how Native American writers work with, and confront, readers’ expectations. In it, he writes that many Indigenous writers work on a “brutally enforced periphery,” and because of this have a particularly difficult time when bringing religious worldviews to reflect on the material in their novels (4). He goes on to contend that writing about sacred matter in fiction requires an “essential objectification” or a “necessary ‘desacralization’ of traditional materials, a transformation that allows sacred materials—from ritual to myth—to move into the secular world of decontextualized ‘art’” (11). This is a fact all of the writers I examine in this dissertation must face. Finally, it is no mystery why Owens chooses

to remain silent about religious beliefs: he doesn't want to commit what he considers sacrilege. Continually confronting this dilemma in other Native writers' work convinced him to write novels that approached the sacred in coded ways, and publishing through small presses allowed him artistic freedom to write novels like *The Sharpest Sight* (1992), *Wolfsong* (1995), and *Bone Game* (1996), and *Nightland* (2001).

In building their texts around deliberate silences, both Walters and Owens adopt a political position that declares they are not willing to mediate their texts for non-Native readers. "Bicenti" and *The Sharpest Sight* are distinct among the texts I examine in this dissertation. Powers, Welch, Erdrich, and Silko all work very hard to help their readers grasp the religious beliefs they reference in their novels, while Alexie uses his medicine person to deconstruct romantic stereotypes. But Walters's and Owens's texts declare emphatically that Native artists have been mediating between two cultures for far too long. They communicate that it is time for readers to either educate themselves, or simply acknowledge that not all texts are meant for them. As Jana Sequoya writes, when it comes to Indigenous religions, "the hermeneutical project of American literary criticism must contend with the unreadable sign" (465). Readers must learn how to deal with the unstated as well. "Bicenti" and *The Sharpest Sight* demonstrate a new, autonomous direction for Native American literature. In doing so, they both show how, even after years of assimilation, religious views persist and shape Indigenous views of the world. They declare these views important enough to maintain behind silence, exactly as they exist, without translation or dilution.

Endnotes

NOTES FOR THE INTRODUCTION

¹ For more information on the journey of the Omaha Sacred Pole, see Robin Ridington's *Blessing for a Long Time: The Sacred Pole of the Omaha Tribe*, or the PBS documentary, *Return of the Sacred Pole* (1992).

² There are many other works that document the abuses of Native American religions by the New Age Spiritual Movement. See "Spirituality for Sale: Sacred Knowledge in the Consumer Age" by Christopher Ronwanièn:te Jocks, "The Tribe Called Wannabee: Playing Indian in America and Europe" by Rayna Green, "Just What's All This Fuss About Whiteshamanism Anyway?" by Wendy Rose, "How(!) Is An Indian?: A Contest of Stories" by Jana Sequoya, and *Playing Indian* by Philip Deloria.

³ See articles by Felicia Fonesca.

⁴ See my article, "The Great American Love Affair," in *Bringing Light to Twilight: Perspectives on a Pop Culture Phenomenon*, edited by Giselle Anatole.

⁵ Conversation with Doug Glennie, September 2009.

NOTES FOR CHAPTER ONE

⁶ It is not my intention to talk about how medicine works. Like many of the writers included in this dissertation, not only do I believe that is wrong and constitutes a violation of sacred beliefs, but what medicine people are capable of is really only known to them. Their knowledge is carefully protected and carefully passed down. Nor will I venture into debates about the "authenticity" of religious ideology

included in these novels. Rather, I investigate how medicine people are portrayed and the complications surrounding that portrayal—one of which is, ironically, precisely the limited knowledge about how medicine people work.

⁷ Most commonly known as a “vision quest.” Yet, like most of the complicated cultural concepts Power invokes in this novel, that translation, too, is inadequate, because the word also implies the *process* of “crying” or “praying” as well as the end result itself, the vision (Belle).

⁸ Paula Gunn Allen’s *The Sacred Hoop* is a well-known text on this subject, but there are more recent volumes that specifically address the responsibilities of working on Native authored texts as a cultural outsider in academia, such as Devon Mihesuah and Angela Wilson’s *Indigenizing the Academy: Transforming Scholarship and Empowering Communities* or Mihesuah’s edited volume, *Natives and Academics: Researching and Writing about American Indians*.

⁹ This name does not contain a typographical error. Yet another problem for Indigenous languages is the inadequate availability of diacritical marks on computers, which is particularly problematic now that everything is typed and more and more Indigenous artists have begun to work in their mother tongues. I also confronted this issue in this chapter, because I did not have the right accent mark for Cuwignaka Duta, which should have a caron over the “C.”

¹⁰ There are many book-length studies on how different tribes view medicine, not many of them written by Native peoples. I do not mean to imply that these books have no value, but the cultural beliefs surrounding medicine are so complex, and as

previously noted, so carefully protected, that the publication of these books is a violation. Cultural translation—or lack thereof—is particularly problematic in these volumes. For a culturally respectful study of medicine people and their beliefs and practices, I recommend Robert Conley’s recent book, *Cherokee Medicine Man: The Life and Work of a Modern-Day Healer*.

¹¹ In “The Stones Shall Cry Out: Consciousness, Rocks, and Indians,” George Tinker explains that stones have always been seen as conscious beings by Native peoples and are “the oldest living relatives” (108). In “Snakes,” then, perhaps the stones move in response to the western view of the natural world espoused by Revered Pyke in an attempt to fight the domination of the natural world envisioned by the descendants of Adam.

¹² For a brilliant historical contextualization of “Snakes” and the attack on Fort Laramie, see Jacqueline Vaught Brogan’s article, “Two Distinct Voices.”

NOTES FOR CHAPTER TWO

¹³ A term coined by James Clifford in *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*.

¹⁴ Donahue’s article diagnoses the problems with adhering too closely to genre definitions, of which he accuses Velie. His article argues that in *The Heartsong of Charging Elk* Welch avoids the pitfalls of a historical narrative by placing Charging Elk outside America and in this way frees his character from the stereotypes and overplayed narratives that adhere to *Fools Crow*. However, Donahue doesn’t discuss

how it might be possible to disrupt genre conventions while maintaining a setting in the United States, a large component of Velie's argument.

¹⁵ Like the issue of how to deal with history in Native American novels, English as a mediated language has always been and continues to be a source of contention among Native writers, as I discuss at length in my first chapter.

¹⁶ In his recent review of Treuer's book for *American Indian Quarterly* Arnold Krupat objects to Treuer's assessment of the language in *Fools Crow*, calling it a "conversation between *two cultural perspectives*" (144, italics original). He writes, "what the style creates is an experience that may indeed have something to do with traditional Blackfoot culture" (145). *May?* Not only is the term "Blackfoot" wrong, Krupat seems unsure whether or not the language-approximation in this novel has any cultural value and never addresses how a reader should approach or view these formulations.

¹⁷ Brooks McNamara argues in his analysis of "frontier medical messiahs" that Americans were taught by traveling medicine shows of the 1880s that Native medicine people knew the secrets of the universe and could use them to heal. See his article, "The Indian Medicine Show" in *Educational Theatre Journal* 23.4 (1971).

¹⁸ Wendy Belcher, in her article "Conjuring the Colonizer: Alternative Readings of Magical Realism in Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues*," contends that Alexie reverses the binary between magic/medicine and religion/rationalism, instead showing that the forces of dominant society to re-write Native religion as "rational" and modern society as "magic." She does a sophisticated linguistic reading using Todorov's

definition of the “fantastic,” and her argument is compelling. Yet, the average reader will not do the work Belcher does in order to detail the disruption of this binary.

¹⁹ In his study, titled “Smoke or Signals? American Popular Culture and the Challenge to Hegemonic Images of American Indians in Native American Film,” John Mihelich shows that his students only remembered the images from the film that conformed to their previous conceptions of Native peoples (in this case, as drunks) even *after* extensive conversation in the classroom.

NOTES FOR CHAPTER THREE

²⁰ For more information about Parsons’ role as a feminist, New Woman, and anthropologist, see *Elsie Clews Parsons: Inventing Modern Life* by Desley Deacon.

²¹ Trinity, the site where the atom bomb was first tested, is just north of Laguna reservation, which consequently absorbed much of the radioactive fallout from the tests. For more information about uranium mining and environmental justice problems in the American Southwest, see Winona LaDuke’s *All Our Relations* or Julie Pasternak’s *Yellow Dirt*.

²² The Laguna believe rain clouds are returned ancestors that bless them with continued life, and Tayo has, in effect, wished these ancestors away instead of honoring them. In addition, Tayo’s prayer is selfish and disregards the needs of his people; he forgets that he is part of a community (familial, tribal, human) and indulges in his own individual needs.

²³ While Tayo embraces traditional practices—for example, dusting the nose of a killed deer with corn pollen—Rocky refuses to participate in them. In comparing the way Tayo and Rocky feel about traditional practices, Silko works to break the binaries that divide Native communities based on blood quantum, showing instead that identity is cultural, not biological. She further posits, through Betonie and Tayo (and even herself) that mixed-blood people may be the solution to many problems Native communities face, because they contain within themselves pieces of both worlds only they can bring together in harmony. As Elizabeth Evansdaughter notes, in *Ceremony* “half-breeds are the solution to our problems as a nation,” but “they are not an easy solution” (84).

²⁴ Betonie is not the only endorsement of syncretism in the novel. Reed Way Dasenbrock argues in “Forms of Biculturalism in Southwestern Literature: The work of Rudolfo Anaya and Leslie Marmon Silko” that the novel itself is bicultural and in reading it scholars cannot privilege one cultural reading over another. Susan Blumenthal, in “Spotted Cattle and Deer: Spirit Guides and Symbols of Endurance and Healing in *Ceremony*,” points out that the spotted cattle are signs of how syncretism ultimately leads to survival. The novel itself is syncretic, an idea I return to later in this chapter.

²⁵ Some critics argue that Tayo’s healing happens in other ways. David Treuer, for example, asserts that Betonie is far more syncretic than I posit here, since he heals Tayo through “Freudian talk-therapy, rooted in psychoanalysis and psychotherapy” (137).

²⁶ Ceremonies are the result of interaction between humans and spirit beings, and though they can change in purpose, they rarely change in form. For more about how ceremonies originate, see works on particular tribal ceremonies or *The Sacred: Ways of Knowledge, Sources of Life* by Peggy Beck and Anna Lee Walters.

²⁷ This event is also known as the Great Laguna Break, which divided the Laguna community down religious lines.

²⁸ Silko has noted this in multiple interviews and talks, but it is best exhibited by her volume *Storyteller*.

²⁹ There are three elements commonly used to support this reading of the novel. First, the textual form of the stories in the text, written in poetic form, which makes them look (and read) like chants. Second, Silko commented in an early interview with Dexter Fisher in 1977 that “writing the novel was a ceremony” that cured her illness at the time (24). Finally, the way the novel begins with Thought Woman thinking the story as it unfolds, which re-creates the act of creation and inscribes the readers into the novel itself.

³⁰ For more on this argument, see Carol Mitchell “*Ceremony* as Ritual,” James Rupert *Mediation in Contemporary Native American Fiction*, and Elaine Jahner in the preface to her interview with Leslie Marmon Silko in Ellen Arnold’s *Conversations with Leslie Marmon Silko* as well as in her article, “An Act of Attention: Event Structure in *Ceremony*.”

³¹ Fitz writes that Silko is a “postmodern medicine woman” who struggles to create the “perfect language that would heal the cultural wounds” present in both her

family and tribal history (xii, x). Along with her struggle to create a perfect language, as further evidence Fitz compares Silko's story of "Humaweepe and the Bear"—in which a young man, guided by his grandfather, recognizes a bear and realizes he is a medicine person—to a personal story Silko tells about seeing a bear when out hunting. He claims that the similarities in these two stories are Silko's way of hinting at her own abilities.

³² There has been much debate about whether or not *Love Medicine* is a novel or a collection of short stories, and so analyzing a small piece of the entirety can seem irresponsible. However, each chapter is complete on its own as well as works within the novel as a whole. As the chapter for which the novel is also named, "Love Medicine" illustrates the religious values Erdrich endorses throughout this novel.

³³ For more about the Anishinaabe tragicomic worldview and how they use it to maintain cultural vitality, see Lawrence Gross "The Comic Vision of Anishinaabe Culture and Religion" and "The Trickster and World Maintenance: An Anishinaabe Reading of Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*."

NOTES FOR CHAPTER FOUR

³⁴ Academic presses that have Native American literature and history lists include *The American Indian Literature and Critical Studies Series* published by The University of Oklahoma Press, The University of Arizona's famous *Sun Tracks* series, *Bison Books* from the University of Nebraska, and the *Native Studies* list just started by the University of Minnesota Press. Louis Owens contributed the first two books to the

series published by Oklahoma and commented on the freedom it gave him to write books he thought were important, even if they would not be commercially lucrative, an idea I return to later in this chapter.

³⁵ Louis Owens, in *Other Destinies*, writes about the difficulty of maintaining “two ways of knowing,” which, he argues, results in “linguistic torsions” (9, 15). I examine the complexity of using English to discuss tribal religious beliefs, as well as the many problems inherent in translation, in my first chapter.

³⁶ Keith H Basso. “‘To Give Up On Words’: Silence in Western Apache Culture.” *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 26.2 (1970) 213-230.

³⁷ Daniel Heath Justice first used this term in his article “We’re Not There Yet, Kemo Sabe,” arguing for an expansion of the canon beyond the nine most well-known and written about Native writers: Sherman Alexie, James Welch, Gerald Vizenor, Leslie Marmon Silko, Louise Erdrich, Diane Glancy, Michael Dorris, Paula Gunn Allen, and Joy Harjo.

³⁸ Walters is Pawnee/Otoe, but she married a Navajo and has spent much time since then working with southwestern tribal cosmologies, particularly in her book *The Sacred: Ways of Knowledge, Sources of Life* co-authored with Peggy Beck.

³⁹ Melissa J. Fiesta. “Solving Mysteries of Culture and Self: Anita and Naspah in Anna Lee Walter’s *Ghost Singer*.” *AIQ* 17.3 (1993): 370-378.

⁴⁰ The repetition of the panther is yet another way Owens privileges the Choctaw frame of the text. Seen by Mundo in the opening pages in California, readers who understand Choctaw religious beliefs know this panther is hunting Attis’s soul, and is

the same panther that appears later in the narrative, terrorizing the government agents in the swamp outside of Luther's cabin, because Attis's *shilombish* awaits in the cabin for the other half of his soul, which will come home with his bones.

⁴¹ Holbert argues that *The Sharpest Sight* is actually a re-writing of T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*.

⁴² Owens talks about this ceremony in his interview with John Purdy, "Clear Waters."

⁴³ In fact, one of the essays in *Mixedblood Messages* titled "Apocalypse at the Two-Socks Hop: Dancing with the Vanishing American" is solely about the 1990 film *Dances with Wolves*.

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